SONIC

THE HEDGEHOG

NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE!

THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

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THE HEDGEHOG

THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

(That means it's a book version of everything cool that happened in the movie.)

by Kiel Phegley

PENGUIN YOUNG READERS LICENSES
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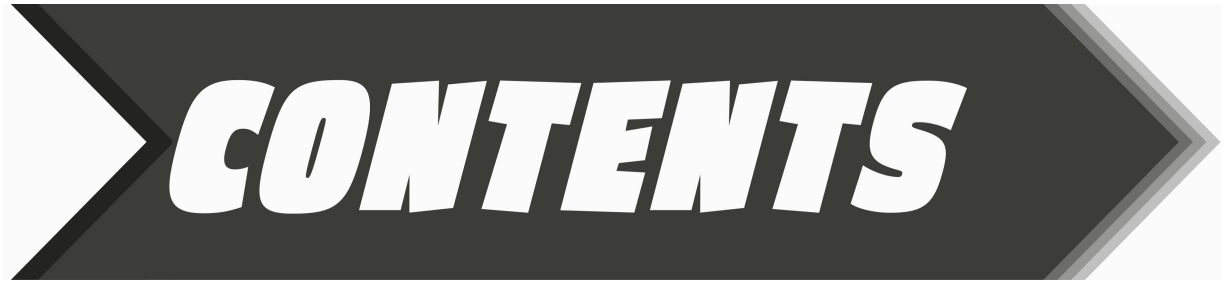

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CHAPTER 1

He had to go fast. Faster than a jet plane. Faster than the speed of sound. Faster than lightning. Sonic had to be the fastest thing alive.

What choice did he have with the missiles on his heels?

Crash! Shoooom!

"Hey, come on, Doc! You're trashing public property here!" Sonic called over his shoulder.

The shards of breaking glass fell in slow motion behind him. Sonic curved his path, and his whole body spun in a blue blur out onto San Francisco Bay. As he splashed out across the water, he could feel the first heat-seeker barreling down on him. And behind it he could hear the laughter of a certain maniac with bad breath and a weirdo mustache. Robotnik.

Even with the craziness of that egg-shaped pod of destruction close behind, Sonic couldn't stop asking himself how he got to this point. Where did this adventure all start? California? Planet Earth? These weren't places where a talking blue hedgehog was supposed to exist. Not like home.

Maybe that's where it all started. Back home. Back with Longclaw . . .

The island was as mysterious as it was beautiful. Lush green plant life sprung from the ground in perfect geometric patterns. Crystal clear waterfalls cascaded into endless sandy beaches. And the ground twisted and turned not into hills but wild loops that only he could spring through without falling. And when he ran around them, there was music in the air.

But there was danger there, too. She had warned him.

Longclaw was the last of her kind, a noble line of warrior owls dedicated to maintaining balance for all living creatures. Outfitted in blades and battle armor, Longclaw's order had fought for years to protect their

world—a world where the animals of the forest and the fields had evolved to be the dominant species; a world ruled by claw and fang.

But by the time Sonic knew her, the old owl was less a radical warrior and more a wise mother. She was the only one who had cared for him after the emergence of his powers. Even in their world, the blue fur . . . the electric speed . . . it was nearly indescribable. There were some who believed his powers would unleash chaos on the world.

And so Longclaw took him into hiding on the island. There he could run free and be something close to a normal kid. The most chaotic things about his life were his hilarious pranks. That's how he saw it.

Whoooooosh!

Wind whipped through the old hut they shared on that last night. Longclaw reached for the scabbard of her ancient blade. Her wings twitched as she called, "Who goes there?"

"Ha! Gotcha again!" Sonic laughed as he popped out from under the bed's covers. He'd just hit the place with an immense amount of wind.

"Sonic!" Longclaw called, leaning on her weapon for support. "You can't go bouncing across the island like that! Someone could have seen you."

"No one saw me—I'm too fast! And anyway, I wanted to bring you this."

He lifted up a sunflower, radiant and delicate. They grew on the far side of the island. The one that pointed back to the rest of the world.

The old owl took the blossom in her feathers and touched it gingerly. Then her eyes snapped into focus. She heard something. "Get down!" Longclaw shouted, and wrapped Sonic in her mighty wings.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

A flash of arrows flew through the windows and embedded themselves in the hut's weak walls.

A split second later, Longclaw blasted through the roof with Sonic clenched firmly in her talons. On the edges of his vision, Sonic could see who had fired the arrows: echidnas! They were coarse, vicious cousins of hedgehogs. And the hoods these ones wore showed their allegiance to the powerful warlords who had chased Sonic his whole life. They wanted to unleash the chaos energy inside him and overtake the world.

And by visiting the far side of the island where he'd most certainly been spotted, he'd led them right to his home.

The echidnas swarmed everywhere around the hut. Their army marched dark trails across the face of the beautiful island like black veins. There was no escaping them or the arrows that reached into the sky after Longclaw and Sonic.

Thwock!

"Arrrgggh!" Longclaw cried as her flapping ceased and both she and Sonic crashed to the forest floor. Sonic rose to his feet, but she stumbled again. The echidnas would be on them at any moment, but all he could think about was the wound he saw on Longclaw where the arrow bit deep into her side.

"Listen carefully, Sonic," she coughed as she limped to his side. "You have a power unlike anything I've ever seen. And that means someone will always want it. The only way to stay safe is to stay hidden. And you'll have to do it without me."

"NO!" Years later, Sonic still remembered the sting of tears in his eyes. "I'll shock them all until they never come for us again!"

"It's too late for that. And besides, you don't want to live only to destroy. You were meant for more than chaos," she said, like she had a thousand times before. "I don't know why this power came to you, but I have to believe that it was for more than being a pawn in someone else's game. That's why you must use the rings to travel to another planet—one whose inhabitants are ignorant of the larger universal order."

She showed him how they worked, the golden rings of almost unimaginable power. But Longclaw always warned Sonic that their powers were finite. He could hold one in his hands, imagine a place he wanted to travel, and the ring would expand to warp him where he wanted to go. But then it would dissipate. He didn't have many rings left, and he didn't dare put them to use unless it was absolutely necessary. This was the last thing she made him promise.

"Stay secret. Stay safe," Longclaw had said as a brutal coughing overtook her. "You can travel with one to this 'Earth' first. It may be easier to survive there. But if they ever find you, these humans will do terrible things to you, Sonic. I've seen what they're capable of. So if you're ever cornered, keep this place in your mind."

She lifted a ring and called forth an image of a faraway planet. Its luscious green valleys and streams were populated everywhere by massive

mushrooms—bright shades of red and green and purple that were beautiful to look at but ultimately empty.

"What if I just spoke to a few of them? The humans?" Sonic had asked. "Someone I could trust!"

"Trust no one!" Longclaw said, gasping with her final breaths. "Promise me!"

"I . . . I promise," he said.

It had either been the smartest choice or the biggest mistake of his life, but the promise had been made.

No need to guilt-trip myself about it now, he thought as the missiles sped ever closer.

Because now that he was possibly facing his own end at the hands of Robotnik, Sonic finally understood what Longclaw had meant. This adventure with the humans was dangerous and deadly.

So where did this story really begin? It was in Green Hills. Months ago. On the side of the road where Sonic finally connected with his only friend. And his only hope.

CHAPTER 2

Tom Wachowski hadn't expected nonstop action when he signed up for the force. *Maybe the occasional car chase,* he thought, *or it'd be nice to foil a smuggling ring now and then*. He certainly hadn't thought serving as a police officer in Green Hills meant shoot-outs and explosions all day long.

But as he sat in his squad car at the town's only speed trap where no one ever seemed to speed by, it was as if Tom could feel all the excitement in the world passing him by.

Deet-deet!

Tom's radar gun flickered to life and registered a pathetic "1.0 mph" on its screen.

"Excuse me, sir, but where's the fire?" he called out the window. "We got kids livin' around here!"

In the street ahead of him, a fat green turtle shrugged his way across the gravel, unimpressed.

"Sorry," Tom said in mock distress. "I thought that was kinda funny myself."

That was how Tom's days went in Green Hills. In the morning, clock turtles here on Route 9. Before lunch, save a cat out of Mrs. Porter's tree. Then spend the night shift getting soaked pushing Farmer Zimmer's pickup out of the mud. Everything just crawled on by.

Green Hills was home. It always had been. And Tom knew every picket fence, public park, and lemonade stand in it. The town had all kinds of people living in its limits, and Tom's job was to treat them all with the same respect. Just like his dad had done before him. It was the Wachowski family calling. But it wasn't enough.

“Sergeant Sprinkles,” Tom said, leveling his eyes at the plastic donut cartoon character that sat on his dash. “If your investigation turns up anything happening in Green Hills—anything at all—please forward it to me immediately so I don’t totally lose my mind from boredom.”

The plastic figure sat inert.

“Best cop on the force,” said Tom.

Deet-deet!

The red numbers on Tom’s radar gun lit up. He straightened in his seat and checked the screen. “Two hundred and eighty-three miles per hour?” Tom asked while checking his rearview mirror to see all of zero jet planes speeding down the road. “Thing must be broken.”

Deet-deet!

The radar went off again in his hands. This time it read 296 mph. Tom gripped his steering wheel as if a tornado might pick him up off the ground. He waited. But nothing happened.

Suddenly, a shadow zipped across his rearview mirror. But it wasn’t on the road. Something was lurking on the shoulder, some prankster out to play with Tom’s relaxing afternoon.

Tom spun around like a gunslinger in the Old West and pointed his radar right where he thought he saw the shadow. *Deet-deet!* 299 mph. Things were getting freaky now.

“I better check this out, Sarge,” Tom said as he opened the cruiser door and stepped out. “Cover my six, partner.”

In a flash, a swirling dust cloud kicked up around Tom.

Deet-deet! Deet-deet! Deet-deet! The radar went crazy. 300 then 302 then 305 mph!

Then suddenly . . . *SCHWOOOOOOM!* went the wind, blowing Tom back and onto the gravel ground.

BLOORP! The radar gun went off in his hand, but this time it didn’t even register a number. Too fast to even clock.

“Sarge, you better call this in,” Tom said as he stood up. But his plastic partner was more absent than usual. Sergeant Sprinkles had disappeared into thin air.

Tom crept around the cruiser. The gust of wind that had knocked him down had blown away from the road like the smoke trail of a rocket. An eerie calm hung over the scene as he stepped up the slope away from the

road. Here and there, the grass was flattened down, making a trail up and into the woods.

With slow steps, Tom walked up the path until it stopped in the middle of the hillside. There was a circular divot there, like a launching pad. The ground was warm, and sitting in the middle of the flattened blades of grass was something glowing—something blue.

Tom picked it up slowly. It shimmered in his hand like something electrified, but it didn't hurt. It was a needle, about as long as Tom's forearm. Or was it, maybe, some kind of . . . quill?

"Well, it's official, Tom," he said to himself. "You've caught the crazy. It's time to get the heck out of Green Hills before the condition becomes permanent."

The rest of Tom's day delivered the same mix of boring and oddly mysterious. He played crossing guard for the town's most beloved raft of ducks. And things were looking up when a code 674 (disorderly conduct at the local watering hole) came in over the radio. Maybe he'd get to do some real police work and not just play animal control.

But, of course, it was just Carl again.

"Don't laugh at me, man. I seen it. I seen it clearer than anybody ever has!" The old nut was harmless, really. But Carl upset people when he got too animated about his conspiracy theories. It didn't help that certain folks in town egged him on.

"So if you saw this thing, Carl, what exactly did it look like?" The bartender smirked as Tom walked up to the small circle of patrons.

"Of course you guys called me for story hour," Tom said. "Why would anyone in this town call the police because of actual danger?"

"Oh, Tom! Thank goodness you're here!" Carl leaped onto a chair to tell his tale with shaking hands. "That's just the thing about the phenomenon on the edge of Green Hills! It's a blur. Haunting houses in town and making mischief; disappearing pies and TP-ing your houses at night. He's a blue devil! I tells ya, he's here to terrorize this town!"

"I'm sure you saw something, Carl." Tom led him outside while thinking of the quill that still sat in the back of his car. "I've got to hope something is happening in this town."

Later, he pulled his cruiser into the driveway as dusk fell. Tom heard a scratching behind his trash cans again. “Trash pandas!” he called into the bushes, and then walked in to find Maddie curled up with a book in her favorite yoga gear. “Doctor, what’s the most humane way to eliminate raccoons that will also put the fear into their various offspring and familial relations?”

“Don’t you dare hurt those poor creatures, Officer Wachowski,” Maddie said with a smile. She held up an envelope from her perch on the couch. “Besides, you’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“No way, is that . . . ?” Tom rushed to snatch the envelope out of her hand.

“Unless someone from San Francisco is hitting you up for money, it looks like it.”

Tom hesitated. “It’s small. Is that bad? Should it be bigger?”

“There goes doubting Tom again,” Maddie said as she rolled her eyes. “You’re worse than me when I applied to vet school. Just open it!”

Tom slowly opened the envelope, then read the letter aloud:

WE HAVE REVIEWED YOUR APPLICATION TO THE SAN FRANCISCO POLICE DEPARTMENT AND PENDING INTRA-DEPARTMENTAL REVIEW AND BACKGROUND CHECK . . .

Tom squeezed the paper in his hand.

WE ARE HAPPY TO INFORM YOU . . .

“I got it!” he yelled.

They kissed and danced around the kitchen. Maddie brought out a cake she had baked him (and tossed the backup one for in case he didn’t get it). But she never really doubted him. Maddie always backed Tom 100 percent. She announced her plans to fly out immediately to start scoping out places to live in America’s toughest real estate market. Tom felt a thrill at the idea of leaving, but also the sting of his nerves.

Later, after she had gone to bed, Tom snuck out to the garage and stared at his “vision board”—a massive picture of San Francisco’s Transamerica Pyramid building shining over the city.

“That’s where the action is,” he said to himself. “Far away from Green Hi—”

Smash!

Tom ran toward the door with hopes of nabbing a raccoon, but all he could see was the lid from his overturned trash can rolling away in the

distance.

CHAPTER 3

It was a rush. A thrill. A rocket ride to the other side and back again. Even if it only lasted for a second.

Sonic could get close to these people. He saw how they lived. He heard what they said. And sometimes, for just a second, he reached out and took a part of their world with him. Then, with a screech of his feet, he was gone. And no one ever saw. That's how fast he was.

"Another day, another flawless run," he told himself while trying to get a better grip on the day's haul. "Way past cool."

He roared up through the hills and hit the entrance to the cave at top speed. Bouncing around the room, Sonic started to feel a charge shiver up his blue quills, and the heat of his red sneakers as they skipped across the stalactites. Even with the electric trails his oversize hedgehog body traced when he went full blast, he'd never been caught.

"Gotta find a new challenge to keep the old feet sharp, Sonic," he said to himself. Being undefeated was getting boring. Occasionally, he thought it'd be good to be noticed, to talk to someone again. But that was impossible. Years ago, Sonic made a promise to never be seen by a human. But that didn't mean he couldn't push that promise to the very edge.

The hedgehog skidded to a stop and unloaded a few bags of chips, a pair of black sunglasses, and a handful of change onto a crooked shelf with the rest of his collection. It joined his stack of near-mint-condition *Speed Demon* comics, the lone Ping-Pong paddle he used to win the All-Time Hedgehog Versus Self Championship, and, of course, his old-school boom box.

Sonic cranked his favorite song—a lightning-quick beat accompanied by wailing guitars. He kicked and screamed and danced across the rest of

his makeshift home. The music echoed off posters of all the places he wanted to run to but could never risk going to. Sonic wished he could shove it in gravity's face by running up the Eiffel Tower. He wanted to ricochet off the pyramids of Egypt like a pinball or dash the length of China's Great Wall in a heartbeat. He had to settle for solo jams in the caves of Green Hills. At least they had good chili dogs here.

Sonic struck the big note on his air guitar and slid into a dresser. Up on top, a gnarled old sack shook loose and landed on Sonic's head. "Ouch!" He gripped his head and squeezed his eyes shut. And when Sonic opened them, he stared at what had spilled out of the sack.

The rings. Longclaw's last rings.

He almost never took them out anymore. He'd been here on Earth so long now, the thought of warping to a stinky mushroom planet seemed insane. He was lonely here, sure, but he was hardly alone. At least there were still people all around him whose lives were like a movie he could control. Sonic was a living fast-forward button.

Take old Crazy Carl, prowling his property every night and snapping bear traps open to catch the alien life-form he knew was just out of reach. That guy was a riot!

Whooosh! Sonic would blow like a gust of wind behind him, and set off every trap in sight. *Ka-Shink! Ka-Shink!* They'd snap off like popcorn.

"I know you're here!" Carl would howl and stomp around wildly. "I know you're real!"

"No, I'm not!" Sonic would call back as he blasted into the hillside. Such good times they had.

But no one kept Sonic's attention like Donut Lord—Green Hills' one-man action force. The affable, pastry-eating do-gooder was the best of what the town had to offer. Dedicated to justice. Friendly with everyone. Ready for anything. And then there was his animal-loving, yoga-expert wife. Sonic called her Pretzel Lady because of how she could bend, but she seemed like the kind of person just flexible enough to see he wasn't a danger. The kind of person Longclaw had never guessed could live on earth.

Sonic almost felt bad whenever he'd zip through their lives at superspeed, leaving only a trail of weirdness behind him.

CHAPTER 4

“Why do I do it, Doc? I don’t know,” said Sonic. “Why does the sun shine? Why are the keys of a keyboard not in alphabetical order? Why do they put those little bags of buttons in new pants when they know you’re going to throw them out?”

“Een-teresting . . . and you have never considered zat zese ‘jokes’ are merely distractions from zee real issues you are dealing with?”

“Of course they are,” Sonic said while checking out his legs on the psychiatrist’s couch. “I mean, I don’t even wear pants.” He turned his face serious for just a moment and continued.

“Donut Lord . . . he’s a man of action, just like me. Any time my speeding around town causes trouble, he always finds a way to keep the peace. He helps me stay out of the spotlight, even when he doesn’t realize he’s doing it. Donut Lord is basically my wingman. But he’s more than that, too. He’s . . . he’s my best friend.”

It sounded silly to say it out loud at long last, but it still felt right. “You can have friends, even if, well . . . even if they technically don’t know you exist. That’s not so weird. Right, Doc?”

In a flash, Sonic spun around the small couch and materialized in the psychiatrist’s chair, complete with a pair of heavy spectacles and a paper goatee glued to his face. This was a totally normal activity he did and not at all the result of his extreme solitude. “It eez not so abnormal, zat is so,” Doctor Sonic said with a raised eyebrow. “But considering your erratic actions of late, do you fear zat your prolonged isolation is making you a bit crazy?”

Whoosh! He was himself again and sitting up on the couch. “Crazy? Me? No way, Doc, you got me all wrong! And on an unrelated note . . .

wow, look at the time. Gotta go catch the big game!" He jumped up.

Sonic tore out of the window, leaving behind only a swirl of papers, and he hit the streets of Green Hills as evening fell. He couldn't shake the worry he'd had since he saw Donut Lord and his wife celebrating moving out of town.

With his fur itching for action, the hedgehog skidded into a hiding spot outside the Green Hills junior high baseball diamond. The summer's last traces of a little league showdown was a perfect distraction. At least for a little while. When the game wrapped, winners high-fived in the parking lot, and losers made plans to drown their sorrows at the ice-cream parlor. By the time the people had fully split, Sonic took to the diamond and swung a forgotten bat around with one arm.

If talking to one superspeed version of himself wasn't enough to clear his mind, maybe taking on nine Sonics would do the trick.

He dug his heels into the batter's box and called the play-by-play. "Bottom of the ninth, tie score. And exactly who you want at the plate with the game on the line: Sonic."

Zip! He kicked up a cloud of dirt, ascending the pitcher's mound in a blink. "But staring him down from the pitcher's mound is the most fearsome southpaw in Green Hills: also Sonic."

Swoosh! He tore out to the box of the third-base coach and called out encouragement. "Focus, Sonic. If you win this game, you'll be the most beloved kid in Green Hills! Hit it to the guy in left. He's a real space case." *Zang!* Out to left field, where he stared into the sky and picked his nose.

"Ugh. I can't even with that guy." Pitcher Sonic sneered and wound up for the pitch.

With an arm faster than lightning, Sonic sent a crackle of speed energy out of his fingertips and then raced it to home plate, where he picked up the bat and swung . . .

Cracka-thooooooom!

The blur of a bat connected with his pitch and sent shockwaves across the field. "Yes, yes, yes!! I did it! YES!! Did you see that?!?" Sonic cheered as he sped around the bases in two blinks of an eye. But as he dove headlong into home plate, the ripples of motion faded away, and there was no one to cheer with him.

"Alone," he said at last. "I really am alone . . . forever."

Sonic couldn’t stand it anymore. He ran with nowhere to go and found himself rounding first. In an instant, he hit home plate again and started all over. With each lap around the diamond, his red sneakers chopped deeper into the dirt. He made a lap in a blink. Then in a heartbeat. Then in the moment between seconds. And the faster he went, the more his fur and quills tingled with that chaotic blue energy. Faster . . . the air wavered in the heat . . . faster . . . streaks of electric light formed a diamond-shaped vortex . . . faster . . . the world became a blur of hot white lines and then . . .

KA-BOOOOM!

The entire field exploded, knocking even Sonic off course and into the dirt. He squinted and just caught a massive wave of blue chaos energy shooting up and out across the sky. And then everything went dark.

“I never went that fast before,” he said in disbelief. “This is . . . not good.”

The hedgehog spun through town, finding pitch-black houses and dark streetlights everywhere. The shock of his outburst must have burned out the electrical grid for all of Green Hills. Sonic slowed up around Donut Lord’s house. It was as dark as everywhere else in town, but he could hear his friend’s voice from inside.

“I know, I know. Everyone in town has called,” the Donut Lord said loudly and clearly into his phone as he stumbled outside to his cruiser. “Call Gill to see if he’s located the downed line. We’ll find out what happened one way or another.”

The man stopped and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a long blue quill—Sonic’s quill—and his eyes opened wide as it glowed with blue energy.

So that was that. Sonic had finally stepped over the line, and now the humans would be coming for him. His mind raced to the bag of golden rings back at his cave. Would he have to finally take Longclaw’s advice? Was it time to warp to another world and leave Green Hills behind?

“No. No way,” he said. “It won’t come to that. I mean, even after all this, what human could possibly track me down?”

CHAPTER 5

Robotnik knew the odds of an event like that. He'd charted every possibility, run every statistic, crunched every number. He knew this was almost impossible. He was Robotnik. Knowing everything was his job. Now if only those pinheads at the Pentagon would stand aside and let him do it.

His mobile lab rumbled as he pulled off the highway and onto the grassy outfield near ground zero. Robotnik had been contacted twelve hours after the incident. Twelve hours since an electrical shockwave exploded out of Podunk Hills and caused chaos for over eight hundred miles. The defense grid collapsed for fifteen minutes. Electrical shortages reached from St. Louis to the Colorado Rockies. Four satellites in low-Earth orbit burned out. And then twelve hours later, they finally called him in. The fools!

Robotnik stepped out of the armored vehicle and adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses in the midday sun. His mustache shone above his lip, not one hair out of place, and his red lab coat fluttered dramatically. He looked like a superior specimen by any classification. Now to show the yokels that he was.

"Who's in charge here?" he barked as he strode across the baseball field with Agent Stone a step behind.

"That's me. I'm Major Benningto—"

"Nope. Wrong. I'm in charge," Robotnik said, lifting a finger to the stubby-looking military man. "This is a Class Five stellar electrical incident—a coding reserved for only the most unexplained phenomenon. And when a Class Five event is registered, they don't turn over command to G.I. Jerk. They call in someone with the brainpower to operate more than a pop gun."

"And that would be you, Mister—?"

Robotnik snapped his fingers. He was done with this half-wit. Agent Stone stepped up to complete the crude work of speaking to lesser minds.

"DOCTOR Robotnik is the Defense Department's top engagement analyst," Stone said in a clipped tone so beautiful it was almost mechanical. "He has five PhDs, an IQ you couldn't count to, and control over drone technology so revolutionary, your grunts won't touch it for ten years. In a crisis incident such as this, all chains of command bend to his jurisdiction. In short, Major, you're basic. Stand aside."

Robotnik surveyed the baseball diamond as a quartet of lackeys rolled his control board to his side. There was a deep rut dug around the baselines, and no sign that the explosion came from a single source. Intriguing. Somehow, little Podunk Hills contained something that his past jobs (inciting rebellions in foreign countries and spying on every computer on planet Earth) did not—there was a real challenge here.

"Agent Stone, I'm initiating a sweep sequence. Ten miles in every direction should suffice."

Robotnik hacked away on his keyboards with reckless abandon, and his drones hummed to life. The whirring of their blades calmed his nerves and brought a crooked smile to his face. Machines were not like his buffoonish handlers in Washington. They did as they were told with precision and efficiency. And they didn't smell like sacks of sweaty meat.

"Yes, scour every inch, my little botniks," he said as miles of data scrolled across his glasses. "Leave no stone unturned. Ferret out our sticky-fingered attacker so he can be punished like a sick little monkey."

The drones tore through the sky and dove deep into the foliage of the surrounding forest. Their infrared scanners swept across rocks, leaves, and brambles. In minutes, they'd gone miles from ground zero and swung back again, with *beeps* and *bloorps* transmitting every detail back to Robotnik's wild eyes.

And then, in an instant, the needle jumped out of the haystack and poked him in the nose.

"Agent Stone, do you see anything useful in this image?" Robotnik said, zooming in on a section of dirt no bigger than a square foot.

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Of course you don't. You're only human." Even his deadpan yes-man could not compete with the beauty of his botniks.

Robotnik zoomed in on the faint outline of a footprint at the heart of the image and began twisting and warping it with his control board. In moments, a 3-D image of a shoe was before him, and with a dramatic swipe of his hands, the shoe split apart to reveal a tiny paw—more complex than a forest creature's mark, with large flat pads perfect for running.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked the Major, again revealing the depths of his ignorance.

"It's nothing that you could imagine," Robotnik said. "I have determined the precise height, weight, and spine curvature of the creature that left this track . . . but my computer can't find a single match for it anywhere in Earth's animal kingdom. This power outage was no terrorist attack. This is something else. But worry not, my little dunces. Robotnik can track the source of this unclassified miscreant."

Robotnik pressed the controls hard, and his drones rose in formation above his head and shot off into the distance, toward a small cave on the outskirts of town.

CHAPTER 6

Tom took the first calm moment he had since the blackout hit last night and used it to plan his escape. Across his kitchen counter, he spread a large map of the western United States with a thick star drawn around San Francisco in red marker. It went well with the poster of the city skyline Maddie had hung in the garage. All he had to do was figure out the quickest highway route, and he'd be on his way to her.

"It was crazy, honey," he said into the phone as he scanned the map. "The whole town went dark. It was like a sign telling me to get out of Dodge."

"Far be it for me to get in the universe's way, but I don't want you driving out here after a night running around Green Hills making sure no one was hurt," came Maddie's voice on the line.

"Nah, I wasn't out that late," he said. "Besides, they mostly wanted me to save the food from spoiling in their fridges."

"I'm serious, Tom. You can wait to find a cheap flight in a few days."

"It'll be fine. I'll take my time," he said and traced a path in red. "It'll only take me two days. Just me and the open road and not one thought for Green Hills or its paranoid theories or its . . ."

Whump!

"Raccoons!" Tom's eyes lit up as the noise from the garage settled. "They may have made it inside, but they're in for a surprise." He reached into his duffel bag and pulled out a black tranquilizer gun on loan from the department.

"Tom Wachowski, your surprise better not be one of those industrial tranq darts," Maddie said, reading his mind. "Those animals are just hungry. Also, those darts are for bears."

“Of course not. This is just a scare tactic. Love-you-honey, bye!” Tom cut the call off with a swipe of his thumb as Maddie protested. But he knew what he was doing. He just had to shoo the critters off. Perhaps with a warning shot.

Tom crept toward the garage as if he were about to kick the door down to some kind of underworld hideout. That’s the kind of thing he’d be doing all day in San Francisco, he was sure. “These raccoons put my partner in the hospital,” he narrated like one of his favorite movies. “But they can’t escape justice forever.”

As he pulled the door open slowly, a few more boxes slid off a high shelf, and Tom heard another sound—a tiny voice. Did these things somehow turn on the radio?

“Just think of a place. Throw the ring. Think of a place. Throw the ring,” the high-pitched voice repeated. “Come on, remember what Longclaw said . . . If they find you, go to the next planet. Even if it is boring, and smells weird, and your only companions will be mushrooms of some kind.”

Tom spun around the corner and leveled the tranquilizer gun on a pile of fallen boxes just below his San Francisco poster. “SFPD pending background check,” he cried out. “Paws in the air where I can—”

And then the electric blue hedgehog looked up at him. It raised its hands—it had hands! It tried to look innocent. “Uh . . . meow?”

“AHHHHHHH!” Tom screamed and the creature yelled back in kind. Before he knew it, his trigger finger snapped and a dart shot straight into the animal’s neck. It stumbled, its eyes both surprised and suddenly glassy, and it tossed a large golden ring into the air. That’s when things got crazy.

The ring hung in midair in Tom’s garage, a faint glow rising to an array of sparkles. Through the middle of the ring, Tom could see his poster of the San Francisco skyline with the Transamerica building dead center. Then, all of a sudden, it wasn’t just a picture; it was more like a window into the height of that tower. Tom reached out his hand to touch the rooftop when the hedgehog finally tipped over and passed out. The ring dropped to the ground. In a second, a brown bag dropped from the animal’s paw and slid into the golden window created by the ring.

ZAM!

Tom blinked and the ring was gone. Its vision of the Transamerica building faded, and all that was left was an overgrown, talking forest

creature. A blue one at that.

“The Blue Devil,” he said, shaking his head. “I owe Crazy Carl an apology . . . I guess.”

He carried the hedgehog into the house and laid it on the couch. While he slept, Tom took out the quill he’d been carrying around all day and slid it into Sonic’s spiky scalp. A perfect fit. Tom wasn’t sure if this made him feel safer or twice as crazy as he’d ever been.

After a while, the hedgehog’s heavy breathing lightened, and with a flutter of its eyes, it snapped awake. “Donut Lord?” it said slowly.

“It’s real. It’s really real,” Tom said. “What are you? Why were you hiding in my garage? Are you . . . are you here to abduct me?”

“What?” said the hedgehog, standing up. “You abducted me!”

“Okay, that’s a fair point.”

“And I’m here because I needed somewhere safe. They came to my home. The last thing I saw was them tearing through my stuff.” The animal’s eyes grew as it remembered. “And you . . . you’re the only person I could think of to turn to, Donut Lord.”

“Why do you keep calling me Donut Lord?!”

“Because I’ve seen you talk to donuts . . . and then eat them if they get out of line.”

“Again, fair.”

“Wait! Where are all the mushrooms? Why am I still on Earth? What happened to . . . ?” The creature started panicking. “My rings! I lost my rings!”

“Wait, that glowing thing?” Tom asked. “Was that like your mothership?! Because I think it just flew off to San Francisco.”

The hedgehog stumbled around and fell back to the couch, still groggy from the tranq. “They’re coming for me! You have to help me, Donut Lord! My legs don’t work! And my rings are gone. Please! It’s life or death!”

That clinched it. Tom had been waiting to hear the phrase “life or death” his entire life. This was it. A real shot to take action as a cop. Plus, what would Maddie say about a talking animal pleading for its life?

“Okay,” Tom said with his sternest action-hero expression. “Come with me if you want to live.”

CHAPTER 7

The only thing between Robotnik and a perfectly automated world was the US Constitution. If he could shred the blasted thing in the name of order, he would. But as it stood, he legally couldn't stride into any private domicile in search of the creature. So he had to outthink this simple country policeman.

"Can I help you?" answered the cop. He looked like a rube.

Robotnik forced a smile. "Good morning. I'm from the power company, investigating the blackout. If you don't mind, I'd like to take some readings inside your house. Now."

"No kidding, you're from the power company?" The hick stated the obvious. "You must know my buddy Spencer. We play softball together."

"Yes," he replied. "Good man, that Spencer. Now if you'll just . . ."

"Except . . . doesn't the power company usually take their readings outside the house?" the man leaned into Robotnik's face. "Also, my buddy Spencer works for the gas company and he's more of an ultimate frisbee guy. So you wanna tell me why you think I'm dumb enough to just let you inside my house?"

Robotnik ground his teeth. "I'm sorry, Mister . . . ?"

"Wachowski. But everyone calls me Tom. Except my dentist. He calls me Tim and it's gone on so long, it would be weird to correct him now."

"Well, Mr. Wachowski, let's just say I'm authorized to inquire about certain power surges coming from your attic."

"The attic?" the yokel said. "Nothing up there but grandma's hope chest, and you do not want to see what's in there."

He was lying. Robotnik's heat-seeking drone hovered just above the west side of the house, and it was sending all relevant data on an odd

infrared mammal to his smart glasses. The creature was in this house.

“Let me explain some facts to you, Wachowski,” the mask of kindness dropped from his face. “Fact: About twenty minutes ago we clocked an energy pulse with a similar signature to the one that caused the power outage, and the only house inside the radius of that pulse is . . . 55 Plymouth Road. Fact: I am authorized by law to pursue this as I see fit.”

“Fact: You need a mint and a lesson on manners,” Tom said. “Listen, Mister . . . ?”

“*Doctor.* Doctor Robotnik.”

“Ok, Dr. Robot . . . man,” Wachowski said with a sneer. “I’m sure whatever you’re here for is very serious, but I have nothing to do with it. Ask anybody in this town. Everyone knows me.”

Robotnik’s drone slid into the house through an upstairs window. Forget the law. He was going to get this thing. The drone’s tiny camera zoomed in on a pile of old sporting equipment. *Blip!* The screen glitched once, and the heat signature—the creature—was gone!

“I bet they do all know you,” Robotnik said. “I’m sure you’re very popular with all the Jeds, and Merles, and Billy Bobs of this Podunk town. You go way back to the days of playing stickball in the streets or whatever stimulates the dimwits here. And maybe someday you’ll achieve your life’s goal of getting a Costco card or adopting a labradoodle.”

His secondary botnik drone picked up the signature a floor below, not darting but creeping out. He wouldn’t lose it!

Robotnik continued to rant. “But the reality is, I surpassed your entire life’s achievements before I was a toddler. And I can predict every monosyllabic thought struggling to escape your simple mind before it comes tumbling out of your mouth. So if you think for one minute that you can manipulate or lie to me, Mr. Wachowski, you’re even dumber than I already know you are.”

His third, hyperfast botnik swung above him. The three drones triangulated. The creature had stopped in the kitchen, cowering.

“Mr. Wachowski, are you familiar with US Code 904, Title 10, Article 104?”

“Of course. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Anyone who attempts to aid an enemy to the United States shall suffer a potential punishment up to execution,” Robotnik said, grinning triumphantly. “And that’s what happens if any other government agent

catches you. What happens if I catch you will be much, much worse . . . NOW!”

At his command, all three drones smashed through the windows and headed for the kitchen. Robotnik pushed past Wachowski and tightened his fists. He turned the corner to the kitchen and found . . .

An incredibly fat raccoon, gorging himself on leftover cake across a map of California.

“This can’t be right,” the doctor said with certainty. “I’m Robotnik. I’m never wrong.”

“First time for everything,” an agitated Wachowski said, stepping in between him and the counter. “If you want, you can take some of this cake to go.”

And then he saw it. A pale blue light shone from the counter. Robotnik grabbed and lifted up a long animal quill, glowing with a strange power. It was so erratic, the light of that spike. Chaos unlike his mechanical world, but still powerfully attractive.

“Oh look, I was right. Note my lack of surprise,” Robotnik said as he clicked his control pad and the drones spun around their heads. “Five seconds before I let them tear this place apart . . .”

“Listen, pal. I’m the closest thing to the law in this town, so—”

“Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . .”

“Stop!” a high-pitched voice called out. In the window, Robotnik saw the creature. Close to Earth’s taxonomically named Erinaceomorpha Erinaceinae. A common hedgehog. But blue. And speaking. Intelligent alien life was here.

“Don’t hurt anyone, dingus. It’s me you want,” said the creature.

And then, before Robotnik could smash down his control pad, Wachowski punched the doctor square between the eyes. “You caveman!” the doctor cried before the world went black.

CHAPTER 8

"One punch!" Sonic laughed. "You laid him out with one punch!"

Rattatat-rattatat!

From around the corner, one of Robotnik's drones began flashing red and blasting the walls with machine-gun fire. Must have been some kind of self-defense protocol, but Sonic could only shout, "This feels excessive!" as he was yanked from the floor.

"Stay behind me!" Donut Lord said, and dragged Sonic behind a couch. Sonic's hyperfast metabolism did quick work on whatever was in that dart, but he still could only juice his speed for short bursts. It was now or never to try, though.

"Can you believe Amazon is going to deliver packages with this thing?" Sonic called out as he collided with the drone and grabbed on to its shell like he was riding a mechanical bull. In a second, the whirring robot killer had spun him around and launched him across the room.

His human friend yanked Sonic from the air and sprinted them both out to the lawn. "Oh, don't tell me that's all you got? I'm just getting started. Let me know if you wannna go Round 2 with the Blue!" the hedgehog shouted, and tried not to puke.

Sonic still felt woozy as he climbed into the cab of Donut Lord's truck. No wait. It was Tom. His real name was Tom Wachowski. *Forget that,* he thought. *This guy is Donut Lord for life*.

"Okay, I want answers, pal. Who are you? WHAT are you?" Tom said as he steered the truck down the side street away from his house. Behind them a bunch of siren-wailing SUVs swarmed the house's front lawn.

"I'm a hedgehog. I feel like that's obvious," he said. "My name is Sonic, and I'm in big trouble."

“Oh, you’re in big trouble?! You’re not the one who punched some sort of government weirdo back there!”

“You think *you* have problems? I was just trying to live alone, honest,” Sonic said. “But something happened, and my powers caused the blackout.”

“Whoa, are you, like, on a countdown to explode?”

“No, dude. I’m just a teenager, and everything in my life sucks right now.”

“Well, I been there,” said Donut Lord sympathetically.

“But we can work it out together,” Sonic pleaded. “If you help me unscrew my life, I can do the same for yours. We’ve just got to get my rings back!”

“Yeah, what is up with those things? I only saw a gold ring for a second, and it was insane.”

“Rings are how all advanced cultures travel between worlds,” Sonic said. “I was two seconds away from getting away from Earth and to a safe planet. But rather than porting to the mushroom planet, when you shot me my mind grabbed onto that weird pyramid building in San Francisco. Now the rings are on top of it.”

“Wait, you mean the top of that skyscraper? The Transamerica building?”

“You know where that is?” It was the best news Sonic had heard in forever.

“It’s in San Francisco. We’re moving there. Well, we’re supposed to.”

A look of panic overcame the man’s face. “Look, this is the worst possible time for me to get myself in trouble, okay? You asked me to save your life and I saved your life. Now please, go find your rings and your mushroom land. Hopefully I’m about to wake up in some hospital room and the doctor is going to tell me that my colonoscopy was a big success. Okay? So goodbye.”

He pulled over the truck and thrust open the door at Sonic’s side. Speechless, the hedgehog stepped onto the road.

“Okay, Donut Lord. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” he said to Sonic finally. They stared at each other for another moment. “Why aren’t you leaving?”

Sonic shrugged. “I don’t know where San Francisco is.”

It dawned on the driver what Sonic was hinting at. “No,” he said. “No way, I’ve already got enough trouble with the property values on my now

very shot-up house. I'm not becoming a fugitive to boot!"

"If you get me to my rings, you won't be a fugitive! You'll be a hero!" Sonic pleaded. "I can disappear and old Ro-Butt-Nik won't have a thing on you. Come on, Donut Lord! You were made for this."

Tom looked at Sonic and smiled. It was the first time anyone had really looked at him since Longclaw passed. "I can't believe I'm crazy—or desperate—enough to try this. Go ahead and get in the truck before I change my mind. But if we're going to stick together, we've got to play it smart. I can drive through some forested back roads until we're out of Green Hills. I can't risk those drones hurting anyone in this town."

"Right on, Donut Lord." Sonic was pumped.

"But to be extra safe, let's see if we can't shake things up by laying low somewhere, okay Sonic? And if I'm going to call you that, you gotta try out Tom for once."

"Way past cool, Tom," Sonic said. "You won't be getting any trouble from me."

"Like the kind of trouble that comes from you spying on us for years?"

"I mean, I wouldn't call it spying," Sonic said as the truck pulled back onto the road. "We were all just hanging out, only I wasn't invited and no one knew I was there."

They drove westward on back roads with speed limits way too slow for Sonic. The whole concept of speed limits drove him crazy. And Tom was mostly chill. He listened to Sonic's whole story—his life with Longclaw and his non-relationships with people in town. Sonic learned a few things, too, and felt a little bad about razzing old Crazy Carl. It was wild. He never realized how much he missed talking to someone until he couldn't stop sharing.

But Sonic was getting itchy being trapped in that truck's little cab. Tom wouldn't stop at the world's largest rubber-band ball, or the diner with the best pancakes in three states, or this deer that was giving him the stink eye. They did none of the fun touristy stuff. It was his first and only road trip, after all.

Finally, into the evening, when Tom stopped at a remote filling station for gas and to call Maddie from a supposedly untraceable pay phone, Sonic couldn't take it anymore. He saw the allure of civilization in a bright neon sign that read THE PISTON PIT. It sounded loud and gross and amazing. Before

he knew it, Sonic sped over to the roadhouse through a fleet of gnarly motorcycles parked out front.

In minutes, Sonic was at a table in the middle of the commotion of a loud biker bar. He wore a cowboy hat, an oversized flannel shirt, and a pair of sunglasses that he borrowed at hyperspeed from the various parking lot vehicles. He kicked his feet up on the table as Donut Lord barged in after him.

“Hello, fellow human!” Sonic cheered.

“We’re going.”

“No way! There’s so much I’ve never done in my life. Now that I’m leaving Earth forever . . . I guess I missed my chance. Let me live a little. I want to order buffalo wings! And guac! I’m not sure what that is but I heard someone say it once. Funny word. *Guac*.”

The Donut Lord looked at him for a minute with pity and finally cracked a smile. “Well, this looks like a place a man can get a lot of living done in a short period of time. I guess we can spare an hour.”

“You won’t regret this!” said Sonic.

“I’m sure I will.”

CHAPTER 9

Tom regretted it almost instantly. This hedgehog kid, this Sonic, he was from another world. He had less-than-zero attention span, a permanent case of the jitters, and the loudest mouth Tom had ever seen on something so small.

The policeman in Tom spoke with authority about how the little fella wasn't a kid but a grown man with a "very rare bone condition," but the patrons still stared as he walked by. "Couldn't you have at least stolen some pants to go with that outfit?" he asked.

"No can do, my dude," said Sonic. "You have no idea how comfortable fur is on its own. Probably better than the best pair of pajamas you've ever owned times ten."

They dove into the fun of the roadhouse, and frenzy followed Sonic everywhere. Their dart game was like a needle explosion, each projectile landing anywhere but the bull's-eye. Sonic rode the mechanical bull until he got bored and decided to make it a perpetual backflip pad. Even shooting hoops in the basketball toss drew attention when the little blue nut begged to be tossed in after spinning into a ball (though even for Tom that was a little fun).

But things went off the rails when Sonic line-danced across the whole place and landed a red sneaker straight up the rear of a three-hundred-pound biker with crumbs in his beard from the seafood special.

"Watch where you're walking, you hipster doofus!" barked the man.

"Well, maybe if Jerkface McLeatherpants would watch how much space he's taking up, we wouldn't have a problem!" The hedgehog puffed up his quills beneath the cowboy hat.

“Look, it’s cool,” Tom said, trying to ease the tension. “We were actually just about to leave. We’re on our way to San Francisco.”

“Maybe let your little friend here speak for himself, dude,” said the biker, his spittle spraying on Tom’s nose. Before Tom could wipe the flecks away, a breeze blew past his leg. Sonic was behind the biker, his hands on his waistband.

“Why don’t I let your pants say what everyone wants you to do—split!” he said. *Shhhhrip!* The little blue hedgehog tore a wedgie up out of the leather pants and over the back of the biker’s head. The biker fell to the floor shouting. By the time Sonic was able to stop laughing, a wall of bikers—all filled with rage—had surrounded them.

That’s when chaos broke out.

In every direction that Tom looked, he saw something flying toward him. Chairs. Bottles. Fists. Spit. Screams. But no matter how he jerked, ducked, or swung, nothing hit him. Instead, an electric blue whirlwind sprung around the entire room in overlapping, scribbly lines of light.

Whatever Sonic touched, he transformed into something ridiculous. A dude throwing a tray from the kitchen snapped out of focus until all the chili dogs were eaten off the plate and spaghetti hair covered his eyes. Another attacker found both his feet in rolling mop buckets and then wheeled straight into the love-detector machine. Two massively muscled goons came within an inch of Tom, but with dizzying speed they were wrapped in toilet paper like mummies. It was like the craziest Three Stooges movie ever, in superfast-forward.

In the center of the storm, things cleared just long enough for Sonic to zip up behind Tom, his fists curled up like an old-timey boxer. “This is awesome, right?” the little guy called out.

“Ask me again when I know how many teeth I’m walking out of here with.”

Sonic shot off to blue-blur status again. He spun into a hyper-bouncing sphere, ricocheted off the ceiling in loops, and bounced to the ground at odd angles. Even as every move looked like a totally random event, the bikers who were still standing parted and made a kind of tunnel of blue speed that pointed Tom right toward the door.

“Wonders never cease,” Tom said as he laughed and made a beeline for the parking lot.

He and Sonic burst out together like a pair of Wild West outlaws. They looked at each other and then booked it for the getaway truck. Sonic was already sitting with his feet on the dash when Tom ran up, out of breath.

“Are they close behind me?” he said as he started the engine.

“Not unless they already climbed over the mountain of furniture I piled up on my way out,” Sonic said.

“Okay, but from here on out, we’re going straight to San Fran. No more legally dubious pit stops!”

Tom tore down the road and tried to keep in mind that his dream job was on the other end of this trip. He couldn’t mess this up.

“Oh, you loved it in there, Donut Lord!”

Maybe Tom did a little. Maybe he’d been looking for an opportunity to go wild after years bottled up in Green Hills. But he couldn’t risk everything to be friends with an alien hedgehog. It was something driven home late that night when the fading radio signal announced, “Manhunt underway for a rogue local, said to have stolen government property. The details of the case are highly classified, but Department of Defense officials say a thirty-something man is wreaking havoc in the company of a diminutive accomplice. Be on the lookout.”

CHAPTER 10

Sonic stared out the window at the morning sunlight. They'd stopped behind a billboard to grab a few hours of sleep, and now Donut Lord was winding his way toward San Francisco on a path that Sonic deemed too slow, too crooked, too dull.

"Come on, super cop," he said as he made his hand an airplane out the window. "I thought you were leaning toward being the action-adventure type. Floor it."

"Laying low, dude. That Dr. Robotnik guy seems like he has more than a few ways to track us down," Tom said. "Let's hope that the satellites don't have us pegged already and that Maddie got my messages saying my cell phone was dead. 'Course, it's probably lying in the ruins of our kitchen after those drones went to town."

"What do you care if Robotnik torched your place?" Sonic said. "You're leaving Green Hills, anyway. The best place in the world, and you're selling out for some crazy land of glass sky daggers."

"Do you really not know how small Green Hills is?" Tom asked. "Talk about trying to live your life before it's all gone. I can't do that back home."

"It's not small! There are literally hundreds of people! And, like, three times as many chill animals. And one really rude beaver named Lucius."

"Really?"

"No dude, I'm the only one who can talk!" Sonic shook his head. "You're not making any sense. You come from a great town, with great people. And by my count, zero evil warlords are trying to kill everyone and steal their inexplicable speed energies. That's what it's like where I come from, and I can tell you that only a crazy person would want to leave a

place like Green Hills. Besides, what could possibly be more important than protecting the people you care about?"

"Oh please, I clean out their gutters. I jump-start their cars in winter. They can call anybody to do that," said Tom.

"Sure," said Sonic. "They can call anybody. But they don't. They call you."

Before Tom could respond, the sound of shattering glass rang out. A grappling hook broke through their back window and buried itself in the dashboard. Sonic spun around to see a spinning egg-shaped drone on the other end.

"Yahtzee!" called a familiar voice from a speaker on the drone. Robotnik. This creep was turning out to be, well, a creep.

"We've got incoming!" Sonic yelled. "I can bust Ro-Butt-Nik's machine no problem. Just drive the car. I'll take care of this. The way you used to take care of Green Hills!"

As soon as Sonic unbuckled, Donut Lord yanked him back down on the seat. "This time, we do it my way," he said, picking up a tire iron from behind the seat. "Here, take the wheel . . . and keep it steady! I put it in cruise control."

Tom climbed out of the back window, breaking out the rest of the jagged glass as he went. He held firmly to the roof as the drone reeled itself close. Tom swung the iron forcefully at the drone's eye, and the machine spun hard to the left, pulling the car with it.

Sonic responded by jerking the steering wheel back and forth. He ignored the breaks. As the truck swerved left and right across the empty country highway, he saw Tom lurch in the rearview mirror.

"Hold steady!" the Donut Lord called. "Who the heck taught you to drive?"

"Nobody!" Sonic said with a laugh. "I have absolutely zero clue what I'm doing!"

With another wild swing, Tom connected with the drone, popping the cable loose as the front of it shattered into sparking pieces.

"Mr. Wachowski, you don't have to be a genius to know how supremely stupid that was," called Robotnik's now garbled voice.

As the initial drone sputtered out of commission, a fleet of little baby bots buzzed to life. They swarmed all around Tom and into the truck, circling Sonic's head. The hedgehog swatted at them, and the car careened

across lanes. The driver's-side mirror exploded as the truck grazed the guardrail.

"I'm taking the captain's chair back," said Tom as he swung into the driver's seat and pushed Sonic aside.

"Good," the hedgehog said, "because I see where the problem is, and I'm going to fix it."

Like a tranq dart, Sonic blasted off the back of the truck. He hit the highway with his legs pumping as fast as he could and spun into a ball of pure velocity. Nearly four hundred yards back, an armored van was chugging along. It had to be Robotnik's mobile lab.

Sonic struck the center of the van's hood as hard as he could, and with a crunch of the fiberglass, it collapsed, and the vehicle spun off-road. "A real bull's-eye at last!" Sonic cried, skidding to a stop to make sure the van stayed down.

"Do you think the egg drone was the last of my botniks, hedgehog?!" yowled a megaphone voice. The top of the van split open and launched a spider-like dune buggy drone onto the road. It spun out its wheels with a screech and was soon at Sonic's doorstep.

"Tech this ugly is more like Badniks!" Sonic shouted, and bolted back to the pickup.

CHAPTER 11

The truck shuddered when Sonic hit the tailgate and climbed into the back. Tom couldn't believe the old pickup had lasted this long, but it was being pushed to its limits. In the mirror, he saw something black quickly get bigger and bigger.

"You make a new friend?" he called to the hedgehog.

"It's over, Donut Lord," Sonic said through the window. "You have to leave me. Maybe if Robotnik tracks just me to San Francisco, maybe even if he gets his hands on me . . . then you and the town will be okay."

"That's crazy!" Tom said. He was touched this little guy would be willing to sacrifice so much for their safety. And maybe he was feeling a little guilty, too. "You don't owe that town anything."

"Somebody has to!" Sonic yelled, and his quills started to crackle with blue energy. "If you leave, who's gonna judge the Blueberry Festival? Or sit in the dunk tank? Who's gonna do all that stuff?"

"Now is not the time to talk about this, pal!"

The dune buggy bot was right behind them now. Tom floored the gas pedal, but the shaking truck just wouldn't move any faster. The mechanical monster behind them sprouted tiny metal arms that clawed at the pavement just inches from their wheels.

"But it's all going to be over soon. And everyone in that town is going to be left alone, like me!" Sonic cried. His whole body was vibrating with uncontrolled energy now, and Tom could see the fear in his eyes as his rage turned to realization. "Oh no, not again—"

"Sonic, don't—!"

It was too late. The hedgehog jumped off the truck and flew three feet through the air to land on the dune buggy. The botnik shuddered as Sonic's

hands reached out in front of him and made a thunderous clap. The shockwave of chaotic blue energy radiated out of those fingers with all its fury pointed back from where they'd come from. In a second, the dune buggy smoked and collapsed on the road. Far back, all the little lights on Robotnik's van went dead. But Sonic was flung back by the force of his own attack and landed in the truck bed with a thud.

Miraculously, Tom still had control of the vehicle. He slammed the breaks and as it peeled to a stop, he shivered at the thought that Sonic might be hurt.

"Hey, buddy! Sonic! Friend! Are you okay?" Tom called, leaping into the back of the truck.

The hedgehog rolled over and flashed a weak smile. "Totally cool, Donut Lord," he said. "Just a teenager reacting to how bad life sucks right now."

Tom smiled wide. "Yeah, I been there," he said. "Let's just be happy that your blackout blast only seemed to kill the road behind us. If it went back far enough, then Robotnik won't be able to call out any reinforcements for a hot minute. Let's get ourselves to San Francisco while we can still make it."

"Donut Lord . . . ," Sonic said as he hopped down and made his way into the cab of the truck. "Tom . . . about what I said about you leaving everyone in town alone. I didn't mean . . . it's just hard for me to see you give up what I can't—"

"Forget it," Tom cut in. "Let's talk about it later. There's a bag of rings waiting for us."

CHAPTER 12

Robotnik gritted his teeth and stormed back and forth inside the newly arrived mobile lab. It had been six hours since that blasted hedgehog fried his last series of botniks, and though his drone-enhanced truck dutifully found him despite his total lack of functioning electrical equipment, he'd still lost too much time to the smarmy Green Hills dolt.

A curse on these commoners. These small-town hicks disgusted him. The local yokels. The moms and pops. They were forcing him to think the impossible. In order to capture that creature, Robotnik would have to do more than outthink them. He'd have to overpower them. All that was left was a sheer display of brute force.

"Doctor, do we have a calculation on their destination yet?" Agent Stone asked, poking his head in Robotnik's high-tech sanctum.

"Their obvious endgame is San Francisco," the doctor hissed in reply. "Beyond that, inconclusive."

"Amazing that the two of them have been able to stay one step ahead of us this whole time," Stone mumbled to himself—a telltale sign of pedestrian thought.

"You know, Stone, I won't miss you when you're gone," Robotnik said with a sneer, and then launched into his manifesto. "Humans are unreliable and stupid. Space hedgehogs are likely more so. I care very little about either of them or their so-called plans. My machines are diligent, relentless. They mean everything to me, and they will not fail me. You, on the other hand, have one last chance not to fail me. Now bring me what I require to get my juices flowing."

The agent ran out, leaving Robotnik alone with the glory of his own mind, the humming of his flawless machines, and the mystery of the quill.

In a sealed glass case, the piece of the hedgehog those twits had left behind glowed—the same glow that had lit the inside of Robotnik's battle van when that creature zapped every electric fuse within forty miles. Now it was time to understand what that meant.

Robotnik flipped the switch on his stereo, and a steady drum machine rhythm pulsated out of the speakers. Funky bass licks filled the air, and the doctor went to work wiring every piece of triangulating tech he had to the blue quill. His eyes went wild with anticipation as his screens sprung to life feeding him data, and his feet took flight in sync with the jams.

Dance! Glorious, undulating movement to the preprogrammed robotic soul of the stereo! Sealed in his workshop, Robotnik could finally shut out the disgusting breathing sounds of his fellow humans and be at one with his pelvic thrusts. The more he stared into the chaotic energy of this hedgehog, the more Robotnik became obsessed with the potential of harnessing its disorder. With that kind of power source, he could convert the whole world into a robot revolution.

Above the captured quill, an energy meter revved up its intensity. Green to yellow to red in seconds as every alarm began ringing in time with Robotnik's pure funky breakdown. "Yes!" he cheered as the distinctive energy signature of the hedgehog fed its data into his computer. "Yes! Yes! Fingerprint that blue freak and bring him to Papa!"

Swack! The door to the lab opened up, and the shadow of Agent Stone fell over Robotnik, mid-thrust. He snapped the stereo off in a swift move and composed himself. Stone suspected nothing amiss, he was certain.

"Um . . . chai tea latte with skim milk, extra hot, just the way you like it," the agent said.

"No foam?"

"No foam."

Robotnik sipped his caffeinated comfort and licked his lips. "Ready the prototype, Agent Stone. And get my flight suit. We're back on the trail."

CHAPTER 13

Tom and Sonic rattled into San Francisco in the late afternoon. How they ever made it, the policeman couldn't figure out. But they were just blocks from the place Maddie was staying in. And if he could find a way to explain to her what the heck was going on, he might have a chance at saving the hedgehog and himself in the process.

Tom knocked frantically on the door to the apartment, and when Maddie answered, he hurried in with a blanketed bundle close to his chest.

"Hi-baby-cool-place!" he rushed in with a nervous smile. "Do you carry, like, cat smelling salts with you when you go on trips?"

"Tom? What happened to you? Are you bleeding?"

He felt his forehead and rubbed off the grime of sweat and blood. "Oh that? Yeah, that's either from the broken window or the robot bee things. It's fine. Anyway . . . cat smelling salts? Or, like, smelling salts for something slightly bigger than a cat?"

Maddie furrowed her brow but pulled a tiny bottle from her first-aid kit. "They don't make smelling salts for cats. But I have human smelling salts," she said, and shot her husband a look. "What's it for?"

Tom laid the blanket down and unwrapped Sonic. He had been slowly fading since he shocked Robotnik's setup, and now the hedgehog's breathing was growing more and more shallow. Maddie's eyes widened and then darted back and forth over the animal's frame, immediately shifting into doctor mode.

"He's a hedgehog, or so he says," Tom said, smiling at his wife's take-charge attitude.

"It talks?"

"Almost constantly."

Maddie put a hand to its chest and two fingers on its neck. “Holy—! His pulse is racing!”

“That might be normal for him, actually. But you’ve got to help him. He isn’t usually this sedate. In fact, he never is.”

“I don’t know his physiology, but he doesn’t seem to have any broken bones. He’s just really banged up,” she said, and in a matter of minutes, she had cleaned and dressed Sonic’s wounds. Maddie took a deep breath to settle herself and then popped the cap of the smelling salts right under the animal’s nose.

“GottagoFAST!” Sonic shouted as his eyes snapped open, and then he spun around the room. The blue blur ricocheted off the ceiling and the fridge with a clamor, and then came to rest atop a bookshelf. His breathing never slowed. “Donut Lord! Oh, and . . . hello!”

He sidled up next to Maddie’s leg, and she jumped just a hair. “It’s Pretzel Lady, right? Good dude you got here.”

“It’s Maddie, buddy. What is it with you and food?” asked Tom. “More importantly, are you okay?”

Sonic bounced on his heels. “Feels like everything’s here, but I’ll be in better shape when we have those rings in hand.”

“Tom, can I please talk to you?” Maddie said, her eyes never leaving Sonic. “Hedgehog, you stay here. Try to rest.”

“Sure thing. I’m great at resting! I rest faster than anybody!” he said, adding, “And it’s *Sonic* the Hedgehog!”

Maddie led Tom out of the room. “Okay. First of all, can we take a moment to acknowledge how under control I’ve been? I didn’t freak out, totally calm,” she said, and held out her fist. He bumped it gently. “Secondly, WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON? IS THAT THING AN ALIEN?!?”

“So, you know how Crazy Carl is always going on about the—”

“The Blue Devil! That’s him? He’s real?” Maddie touched her temple and processed it all. “What’s he doing here? What are you doing here?”

“Well, remember how I told you the raccoons were back? I kinda, sorta shot our little blue friend with the tranq gun.”

“You did not!”

“It’s hard to explain, but it’s crazy important that he gets to the Transamerica building, and I promised to take him,” Tom said. He took her by the shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. “I’m still unsure of all the

details, but we've got a spook on us that's just a shade away from being a looney tune and . . . more than anything, I trust this little guy. I promised I'd get him to safety."

Maddie's eyes raised with concern at her husband, but it only took a moment until she was back in problem-solving mode. "I have about a million questions, but I get it. This is the job. Helping people is what good policemen do. It's what you're doing." She bit her lip. "Blue alien hedgehogs still count as people, don't they? I think so."

"I don't deserve you, you know that?" Tom said, and then kissed her before they headed out.

Sonic stood in the middle of the room, a toe tapping like a drum roll. "What took you guys so long?" he said. "Let's go climb a building."

The Transamerica building rose up in the heart of San Francisco's financial district. Tom was certain that from its pyramid-shaped top, you could see everything from the Mission District to the Golden Gate Bridge out across the water. But after Sonic sprinted up the side of the skyscraper at top speed, the hedgehog said the one thing that was out of reach was his bag of rings. The prize had warped on a section of roof fenced off from the ledge, so the only way to get to it was by going inside.

"It's surprising how much people will get out of your way when you flash a badge . . . even an out-of-state one," Tom said as the elevator beeped through dozens of floors. "How long do you think before they call in my future coworkers?"

"Let's hope it's long enough," said Maddie.

"Don't worry. I'll get him where he needs to go and then SFPD can background check me to their hearts' content because he'll be back to being a figment of Crazy Carl's imagination."

"Hey, this figment can hear you, ya know!" Sonic called from inside the duffle bag.

A woman next to them turned in horror. "Do you have your CHILD in that bag?"

"No," said Tom. "I mean, yes it's a child, but no it's not mine." The woman fled at the next floor.

They got off on the top floor and climbed the stairwell to the roof access. Sonic gagged his way out of the bag dramatically. "It smells like Right Guard and old ham sandwich in there," he said, coughing. "What do you do to your body, man?"

“Listen, pal.” Tom stopped the hedgehog at the door. “Are you sure you’re ready for this? Back on the highway . . . what was with that crazy lightning display?”

“I don’t know . . . it’s only happened one other time . . . at the baseball field.”

“The blackout. What were you doing then?”

“Just playing baseball,” Sonic said. He hesitated, then added, “Okay, there might have been some light crying involved.”

Tom smiled. “Emotions are powerful things, Sonic. Humans struggle with them all the time. But you don’t have to struggle alone. You don’t have to bottle it all up.”

“Donut Lord, you don’t know what it’s like when I let that chaos out of me,” he said. “I’ve never seen humans shoot lightning out of their butts.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Tom said with a laugh. “But wherever you go or whatever you do, you’re not just meant for breaking stuff. Leaving Earth, leaving Green Hills behind. That’s not you ending something. You can build something good from it, too.” Tom didn’t want to send Sonic off with the little guy feeling bad about himself. He was going to be a better cop and a better person for having called this troublemaker his friend—and he told Sonic that.

“Thanks, Tom,” said the hedgehog. “And thanks for saving my life.” They hugged, and then Tom opened the door to the roof.

The rings shone bright in the sun, and as Sonic walked toward them, he began to shimmer with blue energy, too. His nervousness was electric.

Sonic pulled the bag out from its sheltered spot. He held one ring in front of him toward the open sky, focusing hard. Then he turned and said, “Think of where I want to be, and the ring will do the rest.” The golden circle in front of him began to glow—

Kra-Boom!

A swarm of drones burst up over the ledge of the building, scattering glass and rubble across the roof. Their high-pitched hum rang in Tom’s ears as it was joined by the hum of a rocket. A massive, egg-shaped drone loomed up above them. No, it wasn’t a drone. It was a ship of some kind—a sphere of blades and bombs with Robotnik wearing the control harness.

“Don’t leave without saying goodbye, hedgehog!” the mad scientist cackled. “Not when I find myself so attracted to you!” The spook was in full supervillain mode, his red jacket fluttering like a vampire’s cape.

Tom stepped between Robotnik and Maddie and steeled himself for a fight. “Sonic, I’ve got things here. You just run!”

“I’m not running away anymore!” Sonic called. Instead, the hedgehog turned and ran straight at Tom and Maddie as hard as he could. “I’m sorry!” he cried.

And then he pushed them over the skyscraper’s ledge.

CHAPTER 14

“Well, I was not expecting that,” Robotnik said as Tom and Maddie dropped out of sight.

Sonic spun around and faced his tormentor with power crackling across his quills. He only had one chance to make this work. It was a moon shot. A William Tell. A blindfolded bull’s-eye attempt in a hailstorm.

And he’d have to do it faster than anything he’d ever tried in his whole life.

“You want to feel the power of the real chaos so bad?” Sonic taunted. “You’ll have to catch me first, Ro-Butt-Nik!”

“Name-calling hurts, you petulant sack of spikes! And challenge accepted!” Robotnik slapped at his controls with fury, and the spinning cloud of mini drones twisted in the air toward Sonic like a slithering tech tentacle.

Sonic launched himself in the air, and suddenly he could see everything in fine detail. He had sensed it at the roadhouse, too, but he was having too much fun then to understand what was happening. All the madness, the mayhem, the pure chaos of the fight slowed down in his mind, and he could perceive every motion of Robotnik’s mindless Badniks.

With a light step, Sonic ran up the line of drones and into the air like a kid skipping across rocks in a creek. His sneakers pushed off the bots and sent him spinning right underneath the egg’s bulky body. The bag of rings hung loosely in his hand as Sonic spiraled out and ran down the length of the building. He was in some kind of hyperspeed now—traveling at a pace outside the boundaries of reality.

“Aw man, no one’s going to be able to hear my jokes now,” Sonic said as his feet slapped cracks into the windows of the building. “At least I’m

used to talking to myself."

As the cityscape blurred around him, Sonic caught a glimpse of Robotnik's egg-pod flying down the Transamerica building trying to catch him. Fat chance. That thing was a drag. An anchor. A dead weight. But then Sonic caught a glimmer of something in the corner of his eye. It was blue.

Robotnik had pulled up a glass case containing Sonic's lost quill. And with a click, he activated the quill as a chaos power battery. The egg-pod shuttered with a reactive spark, and blue energy started coursing through the entire machine—Robotnik included. Shivers of electricity surged through his mustache, and the creep sped up not quite to Sonic's hyperspeed but close enough.

"Yoo-hooooooooo!" he called to Sonic as the drones caught his pace and came into focus. "Don't run off now, hedgehog! It'll only hurt worse if you do!"

"Don't go too fast, Robotnik! You're bound to hit the wall!" Sonic yelled as he cut back and ran around the corner of the building. He headed for the ground as Robotnik's cloud of metal clashed with the glass, sending shards flying to the street below. Sonic pumped a fist in the air at the sound. He was home free now . . .

Until the egg-pod's missiles blasted off.

Shoooom! Shoooom! Shoooom!

A trio of rocket-propelled explosives curved around the building hot on Sonic's heels. He leaned harder into the run, pockets of glass shattering with each footfall. He could feel the rocket's heat behind him. Sonic needed speed. Crazy, mega, superspeed. He began twisting around and around the building, covering the skyscraper in a net of electric blue lines.

With a zig, he led one missile astray, and it careened into the waters of the bay. Sonic spun around and ran head-on at another. Then, with a jump, he leaped over its nose, tapped a toe on its tail fin, and shot it far into the sky, where it burst like a fiery balloon. The last missile caught up to him at the top of the building, and Sonic led it straight toward Robotnik.

"You think I can't see you?" the doctor cried with wild eyes. "With this power, I can see everything! I'll be able to destroy all that is worthless in this world! Everything will be laid to waste by the botniks, and I will rebuild a flawless world as its god!"

"Speedy delivery for the godhead!" Sonic called, and jumped aside as the missile collided with the cloud of mini drones.

BOOM! The drones shredded to ash across the sky, but the force of the explosion kicked Sonic off his feet. He fell to see Robotnik holding firm in his egg-pod.

“He’s got the power of chaos now,” Sonic said as he dropped through the air in free fall. “I can’t leave him with even a drop of that power.” The street below rushed up to Sonic’s face, but he grabbed a loose ring and called out. “You want power, Ro-Butt-Nik? You’ve never seen power like this!”

ZAM!

The ring opened up a portal in the ground, and Sonic fell through, building back up to hyperspeed. The doctor screamed as he flew down after him. “What are those?! What are you hiding from me, you illogical hunk of meat?!”

Sonic tore a path through new ground, and on the other side of the portal stood a sight he’d only ever beheld in the poster on his cave wall: the Eiffel Tower. The ring had delivered them to Paris! Sonic sped through the streets in a haze of blue energy and sampled Paris life as much as he could in the seconds he was there. He inhaled a loaf of French bread to carb up, downed a dozen shots of coffee for a caffeine boost, and slapped a beret on his head for style.

“Ooh là là!” he called, and whipped the hat off to slap Robotnik in the face. The egg-pod was careening wildly, never as fast or as precise as Sonic was when in control of his powers. “Come on, and follow the leader!”

Schwooooooosh! Sonic sped up the side of the Eiffel Tower and left a streak of flames behind him. At its apex, he looked out over the great city and said goodbye. Robotnik rocketed up after him, but before he could reach Sonic—

ZAM!

Another ring warp, and the pair fell onto the top of China’s Great Wall. Sonic crouched low and sprinted down the length of the ancient structure. Robotnik swung in the air behind him, but no matter how many missiles the egg-pod shot off, they were all incapacitated by the waves of blue energy spiking off Sonic’s body.

Sonic reached into his bag, and he saw that there were only three rings left. “Gotta make it count,” he said as he thought of the next place.

ZAM!

A ring warp sent them up into a cloud of thick desert sand, most of it kicked up by Sonic's smoking feet. In the distance, the Pyramids of Giza towered like alien arrows. Sonic spun into a superfast ball, and the lightning he discharged turned sand to chunks of glass as he zoomed toward the tallest Egyptian pyramid.

"There's nowhere you can run from me!" cried Robotnik, his eyes mad with electric power. "I'll destroy everyone and everything in my path to get you, hedgehog!" A final missile launched from Robotnik's egg-pod and bore down on him.

Sonic looked up the length of the pyramid, knowing another second wasted could mean its destruction. "It was a good run while it lasted," he said, and tossed his second-to-last ring in the air.

Zam! Booooooom!

Fire and smoke poured through the other end of the ring portal, and Sonic collided with the ground in the heart of the Green Hills town square. The ring bag bounced off into the gutter. He crawled up on his knees, but the impact of the bomb had shaken him. This was his last chance. His last hope. His final destination. One way or another, it ended here.

"You're an astonishing little creature. It will be fun taking you back to the lab and examining you," Robotnik said as he hovered over him triumphantly. "Any last words?"

"Guac. I like that word."

CHAPTER 15

Zam!

Tom fell flat on his back. Then Maddie fell flat on him. It was like the drop from a tree branch times a hundred. “There’s no place like home,” he said with a cough.

“Home?” Maddie jumped up and surveyed Farmer Zimmer’s barn. “We’re in Green Hills! How are we here and not dead?”

“Sonic must have tossed one of his magic rings underneath us as we fell off the building,” Tom said, pulling himself up. “Little dude *is* pretty fast.”

“But where is he? How can we help him?”

“I don’t know. He may have already warped away, but who knows what happened to Robotnik. All we can do is what Sonic would do . . . keep moving!”

Despite their aches and pains, the pair headed for home at a sprint. Tom burst through the door and surveyed the damage done by Robotnik’s drones after his and Sonic’s desperate escape. It felt like weeks ago. The room was overturned, books and artwork ripped off the shelves, and Tom’s map of San Francisco had been shredded to pieces.

“Someday soon, you’re really going to have to tell me what happened to you,” Maddie said over his shoulder.

Tom reached down in the mess and picked up the keys to his police cruiser. “The short version is that robot fandoms can be extremely unhealthy,” he said. “But at least we still have a set of wheels to take. Thanks, taxpayers!”

“Where should we go?” Maddie asked. “Back to San Francisco?”

And then, in the distance, they heard the sound of an explosion in Green Hills.

“I’ve got a feeling we won’t need to go that far,” Tom said. He nodded to the car. “It might be best if you get in the back.”

Tom hopped in and floored it, sirens blazing—the first time he’d ever had an excuse to drive like that as a Green Hills police officer. Within moments, they were approaching a smoldering crater in the town square. Robotnik’s egg-pod had come to rest just above the familiar outline of a spiky blue hedgehog.

“Do you trust me?” Tom asked.

“Always,” said Maddie.

“Then brace yourself!”

Tom launched the cruiser over a curb and brought it into a head-on collision with the egg-pod. The two vehicles clanged off each other with a *scrunch*, and Robotnik flew from his pilot’s seat and onto the ground. The airbag hit Tom square in the face, but he shook it off and checked to find Maddie, unhurt but squeezing the cruiser’s cage divider for dear life.

“Now I know what it feels like to be in a cat carrier,” she said. “This is professional development, really.”

“Stay there and stay safe,” Tom said, and jumped out of the crumpled driver’s seat toward the action.

“Wachowski!” Robotnik growled as he pulled himself up. From the wreckage of the egg-pod, strands of blue lightning were still clinging to his warped face. “Who do you think you are, you simpleton?”

“I’m the Donut Lord, chump!” Tom said, and swung his fist hard, connecting with a right hook. The last vestiges of the chaos lightning lifted him off the ground. Tom flipped over and landed in the dirt next to a smiling Sonic.

“I knew you’d make it!” the hedgehog cheered. “Sorry about pushing you off a skyscraper.”

“If you had to do it, that was the best way, I guess,” Tom said with a laugh.

Robotnik reared up with a snarl and began banging at his busted controls. “Why? Why would you throw your life away for this . . . thing? That’s why I only have robots, never friends,” he said. “They make you irrational.”

Ping!

A D battery bounced hard off of the doctor’s head, and Tom turned to see an army of Green Hills citizens, led by Crazy Carl. “That’s our sheriff

you’re messing with!” Carl cried. “And our Blue Devil . . . who everyone can now see is a very real creature who was not at all invented by me.”

The townsfolk circled in, but like a rabid animal, Robotnik wouldn’t go down without violence. He slammed and swiveled the controls on his glove, and Tom could hear the egg-pod sputtering to life again.

“Do you think you yokels can stop me? ME?!? I am authorized by the United States government to eliminate any and all threats to my investigation, and a much higher power authorizes me to replace each and every one of you with botnik magnificence!”

Zzzzaaaak!

A blue blur crossed Robotnik’s face and left him spinning. Sonic the Hedgehog, Tom’s friend, was back at full speed and ready to run this creep down.

“You think you got it all figured out, but you played yourself,” Sonic said with a jeer as he sped from spot to spot, just ahead of the egg-pod’s busted cannons. “You thought you could steal a bit of my chaos energy and use it to bend the world to your will. But it doesn’t work like that. Chaos doesn’t get controlled, and neither do I, Ro-Butt-Nik!”

“Stop! Saying! That! Name!”

Sonic’s quills were charging faster and faster, and his body radiated blue light. Each time Sonic spun around Robotnik, it almost seemed like his body was morphing into a hot, bright yellow flame. Through the blaze of the energy, Tom spotted the X factor for the battle across the field and ran to it.

“Chaos doesn’t have to mean destruction,” Sonic said, dodging from side to side. “I know how it works now. I know what I’m here for. Introduce a little mayhem into life, and the random ride can bring people closer. That’s how you make friends—by sticking together. Right, Donut Lord?”

Tom spun around, the prize in his hand. Sonic had known what he was up to the whole time. The hedgehog could see the big picture after all. Maybe better than he did. “You got it, pal!” Tom called out, and threw the ring sack back toward his friend.

“We’ll see how much your friends can offer when I dissect you in my lab!” Robotnik called, though there was fear in his eyes now.

“Yeah, that’s gonna be a hard pass from me,” Sonic said. “Here’s my counteroffer.”

The hedgehog caught the bag, pulled out his last ring and sped into an electric tornado. From inside, a golden circle rose in the air, revealing in its center a distant planet populated with mushrooms. Sonic burst out of his whirlwind, supercharged and with eyes like daggers. He clapped his hands together and—

Kracka-THOOOOOM!

A final chaotic burst threw the ring right at Robotnik, eating up the scientist and his cruel machine. A shockwave of blue lightning dissipated in the air, and when the sound of thunder died down, Sonic stood alone in a burned circle of dirt. The hedgehog collapsed.

Tom ran to him, crouching low, and picked Sonic's head up. It didn't look like he was breathing.

"The Blue Devil . . . is he okay?" asked Carl as the townspeople rushed to Tom's side. Maddie was soon kneeling next to him with fear in her eyes.

"He was never a devil, Carl," Tom said at last. "His name was Sonic. And he was always one of us—"

"But I have . . . much better . . . style than you guys." Sonic coughed hard, and his breathing picked up to its regular frantic pace. His eyes fluttered open, and the town of Green Hills cheered.

"That might be," said Tom. "But we still need to get you some pants."

CHAPTER 16

It was a rush. A thrill. A rocket ride to the other side and back again. And it wasn't going anywhere.

Sonic sped through the streets of Green Hills. It was broad daylight, and he could stop anytime he wanted. He spun through the drive-through of the Burger Princess whenever he wanted a free double-decker with cheese. He posted up to Crazy Carl's whenever he needed to borrow something, not a bear trap in sight. He had regular movie nights with a certain young lady (totally casual, mind you).

And most of all, he could pop into his best friend's house whenever he wanted.

It felt strange still, all these weeks later, to be seen. To be known. To be accepted by these people that he had watched from the outside for years. But it was good. He didn't have to hide who he was, and even when his speed got out of control and broke something in town (the local gym had stocked up on treadmill insurance), Sonic was never afraid of driving anyone away.

He swung down the road and pulled up to Tom and Maddie's house, but something was off. A large black SUV sat idling in the driveway. Sonic slowed down and quietly zipped his way into the bushes as a man in black knocked on the door.

"Thomas Wachowski?" asked the stern-faced spook.

"Among other names," Tom said. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Agent Stone, Department of Defense Special Branch."

"Another one of you guys? I hate to tell you, but we had some trouble with the last one." Tom stepped up defensively. Through the bushes, Sonic squeezed his fists tight in anticipation.

“That’s what I’m here about. I’ve been tasked with cleaning up ops for our division so certain . . . inequities don’t repeat themselves,” said Agent Stone, handing Tom a package. “Consider this an olive branch for keeping certain matters quiet and a promise that you won’t be troubled again.”

“I can take a little trouble,” Tom said. “Speaking of which, did you ever find any trail of that Robotnik guy?”

“I’m sorry, no such person exists or has ever existed.”

“Oh, how I wish that were true.”

“You haven’t, by chance, been in contact with a certain alien creature since the incident?” the agent asked. “Uncle Sam would love to have a chat with him. Very casual. A brunch, maybe.”

“Who, the Blue Devil? As far as I’m concerned, that’s an urban legend.”

“Very well, Mr. Wachowski,” Stone said. “But keep the package handy, just in case.”

Stone’s SUV rolled out, and Sonic crept from his hiding place and into Tom’s house. He swung through the kitchen and made himself a bag of popcorn, kicking his feet up on the couch.

“What the heck, man?” cried Tom, coming in from the garage. “You don’t knock?”

“I thought it was guys’ night tonight?” Sonic said.

“It’s a little late, pal,” Tom said. “Maybe time for you to go back to your cave.”

Sonic kicked at the floor and shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah. Cool. I get it. Humans need private time. I’ll head out to the hills unless you need me.”

“I didn’t mean that cave,” said Tom. He led Sonic up the stairs to a door that had been locked for weeks. “Figured if I was going to make a go of it in the new, more dynamic, less boring version of Green Hills, I’d need to keep my partner within arm’s reach.”

Tom opened the door to a bedroom. A real one. The walls were hung with all his posters. An old-school boom box was propped on a desk. And on a shelf along the wall was the last of Longclaw’s possessions, somehow salvaged from Robotnik’s wrecked mobile lab, and the familiar face of Sergeant Sprinkles.

“Dude!” cried Sonic. “Dude . . . it can’t be real!”

“It’s real, Sonic,” said Tom. “This is home—for both of us. It always has been. I’m just making it official.”

“So, no more of the siren call of San Francisco?”

“I think that if we’re called to action,” said Tom, opening the package from Agent Stone, “It’ll come from someplace else.” He held out a slick, next-level radio receiver.

Sonic took the device in hand. “Secret government hotline,” he said. “Way past cool.”

Life moved pretty fast, but finally Sonic wasn’t alone anymore. And who knew, maybe he’d get a chance to make even more friends down the road?

EPILOGUE

Far away, the wind howled over the ocean. Storms wracked the cliffs and the water was rising with the tide. Something big was coming. Something that no one in this world could ever expect.

The wind twisted and turned, picking up leaves and branches in its power. The debris swirled in a small twister, and sparks began to flicker in the air as if by magic.

Zam!

A flash of lightning split the air in two, and soft feet landed on the ground above the cliff.

“If these readings are accurate, he’s here,” said the fox, as his two tails twitched in the wind. “I just hope I’m not too late.”

Worlds away, the heat of the jungle made dew drip off the mushroom pads, and a sharp knife of repurposed metal cut its way through the brush.

“Doctor’s log: Day 45. Still marooned,” Robotnik recited into the data pad that flickered on his wrist. Behind him, the remainder of his egg-pod lurched as he yanked on its vine reins. “But thanks to my supreme intellect and specially formulated mushroom diet, my grasp on sanity remains absolute.”

The doctor paused and tilted his wild hairy head to listen.

“What’s that, Agent Stone?” he said to the toadstool that sat on the machine, its front painted with a sticky pair of sunglasses. “Thank you. I like your new look, too.”

He pressed on in the heat. Over a month and still no signs of intelligent life on this rock. What bliss. “An uninhabited planet. No supplies. No apparent way home. A lesser man would die here,” Robotnik said as he smiled through his mustache. “I’ll be home by Christmas.”

THE END

Kiel Phegley is the author of several titles for Penguin Young Readers Licenses, including the *Sonic the Hedgehog's Race Against Chaos Sticker Activity Book* and *Sonic and the Tales of Terror*.

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SONIC 2
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THE OFFICIAL MOVIE NOVELIZATION

written by Kiel Phegley

story by Pat Casey & Josh Miller
screenplay by Pat Casey & Josh Miller
and John Whittington

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CHAPTER 1

For the first time in his short teenage life, the hyperactive blue hedgehog didn't have to hide. He could run through the streets of Green Hills in broad daylight, unafraid of the townspeople. He made new friends every day. It felt like nothing could slow him down.

So why not make a late-night run out of town by the speed of his own two feet? Seattle sounded nice this time of year. And listening to the police radio's frequencies like Donut Lord had taught him . . . well, it was just the perfect soundtrack for a one-hedgehog road trip.

That's how Sonic found himself weaving in and out of a high-speed police chase after a stolen armored truck. His signature red sneakers left a track of flames on the ground. The bright blue shine of his quills got an electric super charge. And he even found time to pick up a chili dog off a street vendor!

"We've got company!" cried the getaway driver, sticking his head out the window.

"This oughta slow 'em down!" hollered his partner in the passenger seat, while pulling out a duffel bag of homemade bombs.

"Aw, come on, guys. It ain't the Fourth of July yet. Why not pull over before someone gets hurt?" Sonic called through the window.

"Gah!" the second robber screamed as he took in the blue blur zipping around at top speed. He immediately lit a bomb and threw it at Sonic.

Pow! The bomb exploded on the street, turning over a mailbox, which the hedgehog easily dodged. This was getting ridiculous. It was time for

action and quick.

With a breathtaking turn of speed, Sonic swung into the driver's open window and pushed the crooks across the cab with a few quick kicks to their faces. "Mind if I drive?" he said, gripping the wheel and trying to reach the brake pedal with his dangling feet.

"Mmmpphhbbbmmmbb!" called a muffled voice from the window over Sonic's shoulder. It was a security guard, hog-tied among the money bags in the back.

"I'm sorry, I can't understand you!" Sonic shouted. "Your mouth is covered in duct tape! But fear not, citizen! I'm the hero you need—*and* the hero you deserve! I am the blue dawn that banishes the darkest night. I am . . . holy crap!" Sonic was about to hit a little old lady crossing the street with a walker is what he was.

SCREEEEEEEEECH! The hedgehog pulled the wheel hard to the right, and the armored truck tipped up on two wheels as the police sirens screamed louder behind them. But the lady made it to the other side!

"Don't worry! Nobody's gonna get hurt!" Sonic called, almost believing it himself. Next to him, the two robbers were knocked out cold, but their bag of bombs slid freely across the front seat! He smiled weakly to the guard in back. "I admit this looks bad, but the bombs aren't lit. So I say again: Nobody's gonna get—" One freshly lit explosive popped loose in the bag, and in a moment, its wick had sparked off another . . . and another! In seconds the entire bag was sparking and smoking with over a dozen fuses burning down to doomsday. "All bets are off! No promises, guarantees, or refunds!"

This was bad, but Sonic had seen worse.

Just eight months back, the hedgehog alien was on the brink of death—battling a mustached madman called Dr. Robotnik. That drone-building maniac had nearly torn Sonic's life apart. But thanks to the help of his best bud, Tom Wachowski (aka the sheriff of Green Hills, Montana, aka Donut Lord), Sonic was able to body-slam Robotnik through an interdimensional portal and off planet Earth forever.

And in that moment, Sonic had touched a kind of action he never thought imaginable. He had been a hero. And with all that power, he had

some kind of responsibility, right? At least the responsibility to kick some bad-guy butt every once in a while.

So this time the bad guys had bashed back with a bag of rapidly burning bombs. So what? Sonic could totally defuse this whole situation before the Seattle PD pushed him off the road and into a fiery ball of death, right?

Swak! A hard hit to his face brought Sonic back to reality. One of the robbers had come to and was furiously trying to knock the hedgehog back out the window. Didn't this clown realize the bombs were set to blow?

"Do you mind? I'm kind of dealing with something here!" Sonic called, and turned the entire duffel bag of bombs over on the criminal's head, knocking him out again. As an insane number of lit bombs fell out, Sonic chucked them out of the truck and into an open dumpster across the street.

Swik-swik-swik-swik-swik . . . KA-BOOOOOM! He tossed the final explosives out just in time to see their new home explode in a stinky fireball. "I've heard of dumpster fires before, but this has got to be a record," Sonic said. "Please hold your applause!"

"Msh-MRRRRRRPH!" the security guard screamed through his taped mouth, and so Sonic ripped off the gag while keeping the other hand on the steering wheel. "There's one bomb left!" the guard shouted. "It's in your spiky things!"

Sonic ran a hand through his quills, which he now noticed were smoking. "Ugh. I can never find *anything* in here!" He grabbed the bomb as the fuse burned down to nothing and threw it at the first sewer grate he spotted.

BOOM! "Drained it from downtown!" Sonic pumped his fist in the air. "See, I told you nobody would get hurt!"

"You're out of control!" called the guard from the back.

"Well, you're not really winning Security Guard of the Year for your performance today, are you?"

Sonic didn't know what the guard was talking about. He totally had this under control! So much so that he absolutely did *not* freak out when he realized he was driving a stolen bank vault on wheels into an ice-cream truck surrounded by kids. "Don't panic!" he yelled. "This is only a drill . . ."

It’s a funny thing about speeding along in your life. The faster a superspeedy alien hedgehog could move, the more it seemed like everything went in slow motion. So when Sonic jumped from the truck and pulled off its wheels while it was still in motion, the action felt like a month for him. But the people on the street couldn’t see anything more than a hypnotic blue blur, circling around the truck over and over. In a breathless whirlwind of a moment, the armored auto collapsed onto the street—grinding to a halt just inches from the ice-cream truck.

See? Totally under control.

The police cars finally caught up, and the look on their confused faces was priceless. They had a half-dismantled getaway vehicle, a pair of unconscious robbers, and one jittery security guard yammering on about a blue devil. From a rooftop perch, Sonic took it all in and smiled.

“No need to thank me, citizens!” he said, more so to himself than to them. “All in a night’s work for . . . Blue Justice!”

As he turned on a heel and headed for home, Sonic felt like life on planet Earth had finally caught up to his speed. He was a superhero now. And there wasn’t one force in the entire universe that could slow his rise to the top.

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CHAPTER 2

Robotnik rose the same way he had every day for eight months. He felt the same arid, itchy climate. He smelled the same moldy, tangy air. He saw the same mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms. Always mushrooms!

His most basic mushroom machine started off the day, raising the shutters of his rotted mushroom palace and letting the eerie red light of this world's sun once again assault his eyeballs. He'd been up all night again. There was no escape from this fungi-infested place but into his own mind.

"*X* squared times the hypotenuse of *Y* squared, divided by the absolute value of *Z* to the third power . . . ," Robotnik mumbled as the room filled with warm light. His eyes were bloodshot and unblinking. "Equals *ZY* squared!"

"See, Agent Stone?" He whipped around and taunted the rock—his only companion. "Told ya I could solve cold fusion in my sleep! Now rise and shine! Another dawn breaks on our celestial purgatory."

He engaged his morning routine: waxing his magnificent mustache until it was at its twirliest, slathering some makeshift sunscreen on his egg-like dome of a head, and dining on a variety of fungi foodstuffs. To date, his best innovations were the varieties of mushroom stews or grilled 'shroom burgers on extra-shroomy buns that he could cook up. Revolting? Yes. But they fueled his desire for REVENGE! That cold dish that tasted . . . quite a bit like mushrooms.

But all was not lost. No. Robotnik held tight to one idea. He may be living on a fungi-coated spheroid orbiting around a red dwarf star, but he was undoubtably, undeniably, unquestionably the smartest living thing on this planet. Just as he had been on Earth. And how would he keep sharp in the face of endless isolation? By playing the game of true intellects against the only intellect worthy of Robotnik . . . Robotnik himself!

"Shiitake to D4 . . . the Albin countergambit . . . ," he narrated as he spun around both sides of his makeshift mushroom chessboard. "Honey fungus to E7 . . . Lasker's queen sacrifice . . . Agaricus bisporus to G2 . . . Karpov's endgame! Ha . . . suck on that, Eggman!"

Ugh. There was that name again. It had slipped out of his own mouth this time. Eggman. One of the haunting taunts of that vile blue Sonic the Hedgehog. And it burned him up to no end that his only source of power on this planet was the seemingly endless supply of electricity that flowed from the blue quill Robotnik had plucked from Sonic's hide.

Revving up the makeshift dune buggy that was all that remained of his once glorious egg-pod assault vehicle, Robotnik went out for his daily mushroom harvest. Tearing up the landscape brought him some small amount of joy, but today of all days, his path of destruction paid out in unexpected results. After turning over one of the endless variety of toadstools, he saw something he'd never seen before. It was a fungus, for sure, but this one sparkled with a strange purple glow.

In all his months alone, Robotnik had devoured every kind of mushroom on this planet. Broad-capped. Soggy. Mealy. Mushy. Even man-sized. He'd catalogued them all as he went. Another task to keep his mental acuity sharp. Yet this new, shimmering morsel had been hidden beneath the dewiest cap available. Grown in the dankest corner of this funky planetoid.

Robotnik leaned in and plucked the small cap, noting its features. "Color? Byzantium. Bioluminescence? Exceptional. Edibility . . . ?"

He popped it into his mouth. And with one swallow, the world melted away as his stomach turned itself inside out.

"Agent Stone!" he choked as he fell to the ground. "I don't feel so good!"

"Then maybe you should lie down, sir . . . ," said Agent Stone.

Wait. Did he actually say that? This Agent Stone had always been a voice in Robotnik's exceptionally crowded head. But now he could actually hear it! He saw the stone flap its lips. It had lips! Suddenly, everything went fuzzy.

He was losing control. NO! He never lost control. He was a machine. A perfect, punctual, precise body of scientific conquest. Robotnik refused to let this miniature mushroom topple his flawlessly focused brainwaves. But the world was melting around him now. He couldn't quite make sense of it. Such a reaction would terrify a lesser mind.

Then, suddenly, in that haze of mushroom poisoning, his brain kicked into overdrive. The darkening of his vision became a chalkboard, and Robotnik furiously wrote the equation of his life.

"Speed of light squared," he mumbled as his body writhed on the ground. "The star configurations point past the Kuiper belt . . . and lead our gaze beyond the Milky Way and to THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE . . . but where to go from there?"

In an instant, a celestial star chart had formed in his line of sight. He knew exactly where he was! But how could he turn this location to his advantage? Like a dream, the answer appeared in front of him. It was like a giant monolith carved into the shape of a word. To reach out into the galaxy and make a complete connection, all he needed was . . . BACON!

"Wait, that's not right. Forgot to carry the two," he said, staring at the vision of the stone word. "I'd like to buy a vowel, Pat!" And an *E* arrived just in time to sear the concept onto his cerebellum.

"BEACON! That's it! My ticket off this portobello prison. An intergalactic beacon with optical frequency multiplier amplified by intensity radiative flux!" he screamed with joy. That would reach past this armpit of a planet to someplace with intelligent life. Not as intelligent as him, of course . . . but intelligent enough to understand the concept of revenge. "Thank you, toxic alien mushroom that almost killed me!"

Work began right away. All he needed was properly conductive building materials (the remnants of his egg-pod), infrastructure big enough to construct the beacon (a mountain of mushrooms), and a power source that could generate a cosmic amount of energy (the blue quill pilfered from that

blasted hedgehog). Finally, he'd constructed the makeshift broadcast tower worthy of his own genius!

"It's time, Stone," he said to his inanimate granite henchman. "If my calculations are correct—and there's no reason to say 'if,' because they always are—this quill is about to power my masterpiece. Now let's light this candle and see who comes knocking."

Robotnik hacked a series of commands into his one remaining control pad and . . . nothing. "Why isn't it working?!" he shouted in rage. "My calculations are never wrong! I! AM! NEV-ER! WRONG!"

Shwoooooom! The beacon exploded to life in a wave of eerie blue light. The air warped with a hot burst of energy, and Robotnik was blown back. It had worked. The pain of his progress had launched a shockwave of the quill's own unique energy signature into deep space. All Robotnik had to do was wait. In fact, it felt like the right time for a little nap.

But rest didn't last long. Before the burning sun had set, the air shimmered again.

Zam!

The heat of a golden ring that lit up the surface of the planet . . . And as the circular portal appeared, three figures stepped out.

They were human . . . or humanoid at least. They were certainly no species that anyone on Earth had ever seen. But from the way they walked and the weapon-heavy armor they wore, it was clear these cosmic scoundrels were scavengers of the worst sort. They were creeping up on Robotnik's sleeping body, which dreamed as it clutched tightly to the valuable blue quill.

"BOO!" He snarled to life while pulling another of his ingenious mushroom levers. Robotnik's latest machine sprung into action, and like dominoes falling across a board, mushrooms collapsed all around on the would-be scavengers.

One had its legs taken out from underneath it. Another took a hit directly to the face from "Agent Stone." In the end, all that mattered was that they were on the ground, and Robotnik was on his feet.

"I outsmarted them all!" he cried in triumph. "Not to be supercilious, but by the transitive property I am now *The Smartest Life-Form in The*

Universe!” Robotnik danced his way toward the still-wavering ring portal and toward freedom. “Farewell, land of funky fungi!”

But an opposing force unlike any other met him on the other side.

With the sound of thunder, a white fist with two bulbous knuckles jutting out flew through the portal, blasting Robotnik right in his solar plexus. He flew through the air and crashed on his back in a pile of mushrooms.

Above him now loomed a kind of creature he had never seen before. Its fur was as red as rage, and its eyes narrowed suspiciously as it reached down and picked up the blue quill that Robotnik had dropped in his fall.

“Where did you get this?” the creature said.

“From a little blue menace on a planet called Earth.” Robotnik smiled. “I’d be happy to show you the way.”

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CHAPTER 3

Tom Wachowski woke to another perfect morning in Green Hills. The dew on the leaves glistened gently outside his window. The smell of fresh coffee burbling in the pot drifted upstairs from the kitchen. And a trail of slightly singed one-hundred-dollar bills drifted in a cross breeze along the upstairs hallway. Wait. That last one was odd.

Tom knew where the bills came from, of course. But *how* they got there was a question that was the difficult subject to broach. Maybe it was worse than Tom thought.

What had Sonic gotten up to this time?

Sneaking down the hallway and toward the hedgehog's room, Tom peeked through a crack in the door. Sonic was on the floor, hunched over his most prized possessions—a satchel that contained a handful of trans-dimensional rings and an ancient map and the feather of his long-lost mom.

"Hope you'd be proud, Longclaw," the kid said to the feather. "I'm still keeping a low profile, but I had to help them. It's a hero's duty."

"Sonic? You up, buddy?" Tom called in. "Get much sleep last night?"

A flurry of wind shook through the room as Tom opened the door, and he saw Sonic now in bed, the covers pulled up to his neck. The hedgehog yawned. It was an exaggerated, cartoonish yawn. He hadn't gotten great at lying yet, which was nice. "Can you repeat the question?" Sonic asked.

"Maddie's making pancakes . . . just the way you like them . . ."

Keeping up the act, Sonic stumbled out of bed and out the door, following the scent like an old cartoon. "Pancakes . . . so fluffy . . . like

buttery pillows . . .”

Tom wasn’t sure how to talk about the mystery bills. Whatever was driving Sonic had something to do with Longclaw . . . the warrior owl that raised him and then sent him to this planet for protection. But he had the Wachowski family to protect him now. Did that make Tom the kid’s father? And if he was, there had to be a way to talk to him other than just wagging a finger at the kid for sneaking out. Every time he tried to talk to him about it, Sonic would make something up to distract them, like create a romantic Italian restaurant setting for him and his wife. The candles were a nice touch, but he could’ve at least brought them some spaghetti.

Maddie, Tom’s wife, said that Sonic was a teenager. The last thing they wanted to do was talk about their problems. But Tom couldn’t let Sonic just run off and play the blue blur vigilante!

Actually, now that he thought about it, there was one way to get through to him . . .

It was an age-old Wachowski family form of male bonding: fishing. Tom had done it with his dad—even though they never caught anything. But the boat was a place to slow things down and focus on what was important. Plus, once Sonic was out on the water, he was a captive audience. The little guy still wouldn’t learn to swim.

“Any bites yet, Sonic?” Tom said after they’d been out on the water fifteen minutes. His shipmate was silent. “Yeah, me neither. Just be patient. It’s like my dad always told me: The key to fishing is patie—”

Snoooooooorrrrrreee! Sonic’s nose snorted hard as he fell into a deep sleep on the other side of the boat. His heavy head tilted to one side, then the other, and then it led his whole body off the edge and into the water.

“Gah! Help!” Sonic cried as his face burst from the water. “I can’t swim! Call the coast guard! Call the mermaids! Somebody save me!”

Tom reached into the water with a steady hand and pulled his friend back on board, getting a face full of spray up his nose in the process.

“You’re all right. Calm down,” he said. “At least now you had a chance to catch up on your sleep. Maybe now we can have a talk.”

“About what?” Sonic looked worried.

“Where do I start? The lying? The sneaking out? This reckless vigilante act?”

“So *this* was your big plan? Trap me on the high seas and bust me? You know that water is my kryptonite!”

“This wasn’t a trap.” Tom’s voice softened. “Me and Maddie are worried about you. We want to know why you’re doing this.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me. Come on, I’m here to help.”

“Help?!” Sonic was forceful, almost angry. “See, that’s why I sneak out at night—because you still think I’m the scared little kid you found in your garage. But I’m not. I’ve grown up. I can take care of myself.” He stood up in the boat, his little fists clenched hard. “I don’t need anyone’s help!”

“I get it,” said Tom. “That’s how I felt when I was your age—powerful, invincible . . . but you’re still a kid, Sonic. You need to slow down.”

“Me? Slow down? You know who you’re talking to here, right?”

“I know it’s hard, but you’re supposed to be a teenager, not a superhero.”

“And you’re supposed to be my friend . . . not my dad!”

There it was. Tom set his jaw and looked at the kid eye to eye. Maybe Sonic was right. Maybe he’d been pushing too hard to be a parent when that’s not what this kid needed at all.

“Okay. I’m not your dad,” Tom said finally. “But me and Maddie care about you more than anyone in the world. We are your family. That means no matter how powerful you are, you don’t have to do this alone. Sometimes the strongest thing you can do is ask for help.”

“Then can you help me prove to you that I’m not ‘still a kid’? Besides, you know, being a secret crime-fighting vigilante.”

Tom thought about it. If Sonic was going to prove he was responsible, he needed the chance to do it. “What about the wedding?” he offered finally. “Maddie’s sister ties the knot next week. I’m leaving Deputy Wade

in charge of the town. How about we leave you in charge of the house for the weekend while we go to Hawaii?"

"Really?!?" Sonic's eyes hadn't lit up like that for a month.

"We can try it, *if* you promise to go easy on the junk food, be in bed by nine, not watch any R-rated movies, and—most important of all—STAY HOME."

"Deal! Now let's tell Maddie and make this official!" the hedgehog shouted, and began to paddle the boat so furiously it turned in circles on the water.

"Whoa! Sonic! Remember what I said about slowing down!"

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CHAPTER 4

Far above town, a storm was brewing. The cliffs darkened as the wind twisted and turned, picking up leaves and branches in its power as it howled over the hills. The debris swirled in a small twister, and sparks began to flicker in the air as if by magic.

Something big was coming. Something that no one in this world would ever expect.

Zam!

A flash of lightning split a golden ring in the air, and soft feet landed on the ground.

“If these readings are accurate, he’s here,” said Miles “Tails” Prower. “I just hope I’m not too late.”

The fox adjusted the dials on his handheld tracking device. The computerized scope had guided him for many months and across many worlds. He’d calibrated it perfectly to lock in on the unique chaos energy that radiated from the universe’s greatest hero. Well . . . almost perfectly. Tails had reached as many natural disasters, dangerous adversaries, and booby traps as a creature could find in the various zones of galactic civilization on his way. But whenever a planet would prove a dead end, his device would pick up another hint of that power, which seemed to be concentrated in one animal above all others.

“Sonic,” he said softly. “What kind of planet did you end up on?”

Splitting his twin tails apart, the fox began spinning them like the blades of an airship and floated up above the green hills of a tiny village on the

universe’s most backwater planet: Earth. Even the most detailed galactic encyclopedias warned about this place—a land of war-making, animal-trapping primates and their barbaric tech.

Of course, people had been wrong about these things before. They were wrong about Tails, sure enough. He was an inventor, a puzzle-solver, and a go-getter. But when anyone on his home planet looked at him, all they ever saw was what made him different—never what he could do to bring creatures together.

But that could change here. If he could find Sonic before their enemies did, they might have a chance of saving the universe once and for all. Together. But of course, finding the hedgehog was only step one, and if his readings were correct, there was something much more powerful yet uncovered on this planet.

Tails landed softly on the edge of town and adjusted his tool belt. On that belt, he held everything he needed to survive this or any world: electro-nets, ultrasonic blasters, goo bombs . . . but no more warp rings. This planet was his last jump—his last chance at finding Sonic.

Skulking in the foliage on the side of the road, Tails checked his device again. “He’s close. I just need a way to reach him without being spotted,” he said, and grabbed a pair of long branches still covered in leaves. Using them as cover, Tails hopped and skipped his way along the road and into town. It was . . . nicer than he expected. The air was sweet. The climate was temperate. But what about these “people”? Were they dangerous?

Just then, one of them walked across the street from Tails’ location. He simulated what he assumed was a very convincing bush form, and from beneath his stolen branches, listened to the Earth man’s bizarre song.

“Sheriff for the weekend! Sheriff for the weekend! Wade, you are the greatest sheriff for the weekend!” rang out the man’s cracking, pitchy voice.

Tails observed the man cross toward a black-and-white transport of some sort. Its engine was already running, and the vehicle looked official with its golden badge on the door. But the man seemed less so.

“Oh, gosh!” the human said, patting his pockets all over. “Where’d my ticket book go? Can’t keep the peace without the paperwork, Wade!” He got down on all fours and began to look for the missing manual.

“I get it now,” Tails whispered to himself. “They put the village idiot in charge of security.”

But the vehicle seemed ideal to aid in Tails’ quest. And coming from one officer of the law to a hero-in-training like Tails? Well, it was practically like he was commandeering the car. Borrowing it, really.

“Combustion engine.” He marveled at the transport’s sputtering motor. “Crude technology, but I can make it work.” Tails flew through the open window and studied the gearshift.

“Oh, there you are, you little rascal!” the man called from the street. “How’d you fall into a sewer grate, huh?”

Tails had only seconds, but there was one key design flaw with the vehicle. A fox of his size couldn’t reach the pedals! Tails flipped through the many devices on his tool belt until he found what he needed: his custom-made magne-flops. He slipped the flats over his sneakers, and their bottoms created the barest magnetic effect. They pressed the pedals down without Tails having to touch them.

Vrrroooom!

The transport tore off into Green Hills, and Tails heard the voice of its previous driver cry, “Hey! My car!” He’d have to make it up to him somehow. For one, he was going to have to upgrade this vehicle’s capabilities before he brought it back. He could make the changes on the fly, and he’d need to soon if he was going to find Sonic . . . before it was too late.

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CHAPTER 5

Sonic had to keep his cool. Even if he was practically bouncing off the walls for a weekend to himself, he couldn't let it show too much. He didn't want to make Donut Lord and Maddie worry. So rather than bounce off the walls, he threw himself into work. And today's work was running Sonic Air.

In truth, there was no airplane involved in Tom and Maddie's trip. Really, the only air they'd travel through was the oxygen floating in the center of the warp ring. But to class it up, Sonic sped his way into the outfit of an airline gate agent. He greeted them as they prepared to step through a ring and into Hawaii.

"Welcome to Sonic Air . . . the fastest way to travel," he said, checking the names on a clipboard. "We will now begin boarding groups one and two."

"Aw . . . Sonic, this is so fun," said Maddie, kneeling down to pat the quills on his head.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. You're in group three. Please wait your turn."

"Woof!" barked the family dog, Ozzy, enlisted by Sonic as airline security.

"Please don't pet the dog, sir. He's working," Sonic said to Tom. His expression remained flat and in character—even if he was a little nervous inside. "Okay, you're free to go now. Buh-bye."

"Not so fast, Sonic. First you gotta bring it in," Tom said, opening his arms wide for a hug.

“Tom, I’m about to be Hedgehog of the House for the first time. I think I’m a little too mature to hug you goodbye.”

“How about a power bump?” Maddie compromised. Sonic threw a fist into the air, and when it was joined by theirs, he knew he’d be okay. They’d come back. He wouldn’t be left alone again. So he tossed a ring into the air.

“We’ll call to check in as soon as we—” Tom started, but . . .

Zam!

The warp closed, leaving Sonic and Ozzy alone in the house. At last. “It’s forty-eight hours until they come back.” The hedgehog smiled at his animal pal. “We’ve got six hundred and twenty-eight TV channels, a house full of food, and no supervision. Let’s do . . . *everything*.”

For tonight, “everything” included jumping on the couch, rolling in piles of junk food, makeover mud masks, skateboarding down the stairs and then stunt-jumping over their wedding crystal. But Sonic couldn’t stop there. Total freedom wasn’t total freedom if he couldn’t run a riding mower through the house. After the joyful shenanigans, he retired to a kiddie pool bubble bath with his favorite pink flamingo floatie (never too careful about drowning) and blasted EDM through the expensive speakers.

But he had to cut his R & R short as a storm brewed. The dark skies and ominous thunder would’ve spooked even the bravest hero. Sonic decided to go back inside and settle in for a movie. He had his favorite snacks with him, his most comfortable couch blanket, and his satchel by his side with his phone waiting for Tom’s call.

The storm bellowed and boomed louder outside until even Sonic had to turn up the volume to push it out. Then all at once . . . *Zam!* A familiar electric cracking pierced the thunder, and the lights throughout the house went out.

“Woo! Blackout!” Sonic cheered to Ozzy. To him, this was merely the perfect opportunity for spooky-story hour. Pulling his blanket overhead and snapping on a flashlight, Sonic settled down for a few blood-curdling campfire tales . . . but the whimpers from Ozzy gave him pause. “Aw, sorry, buddy . . . Everything’s okay,” he said.

But then it happened.

The TV snapped to life, drowning the room in gray light and loud static. Sonic tried the remote in the still-darkened room, but it had no effect. Ozzy jumped off the couch and ran to hide. And then all around, the lights began to flicker.

"ENNG!" rang a familiar voice from within the glitchy TV. In a blink, the wild-eyed scientist who haunted Sonic's nightmares filled the entire screen. Robotnik was back. But how? "This is a test, only a test, of the emergency broadcast system!" he called in a mocking monotone. "But it's about to get *real* . . ."

The doorbell rang, and Sonic turned his head toward it slowly. As if in a trance. Panic had slowed him to a halt. "You might want to get that . . . ," Robotnik called from the screen. Then as Sonic shook off his nerves and sprinted to the door, the real deal opened the door and walked through in the flesh.

"You didn't miss me?" Dr. Robotnik sneered. He looked different than before—warped and wild.

"Eggman . . ." Sonic shook his head in disbelief. "I don't know how you got back, but you made a big mistake coming here."

"On the contrary. The only mistake was you thinking you'd won. But that was just a prelude. An hors d'oeuvre. An aperitif . . ."

"I get it." Sonic rolled his eyes. The monologuing on this guy!

"Oh, I don't think you do. But you're about to . . . and so will that idiot sheriff! And his wife! And your little dog, too!"

Fed up, Sonic charged at Robotnik. But a split second before he could smash in the villain's face, a gloved fist careened out of the corner of Sonic's eye and sent him flying. *Wham!* Sonic scrambled up from amid the wreckage of the coffee table that broke his fall, and as the room came back into focus, he saw something he never thought he'd see again . . . an echidna.

Years ago, these creatures had taken everything from him when they killed Longclaw. They made Sonic an orphan—left him alone until Tom and Maddie had accepted him. And now a massive echidna was staring him down.

The animal was muscular, a born bruiser. And his thick red fur grew out in braids that may have well been a weapon of their own. But nothing was compared to his fists. Beneath white gloves, they held huge knuckle spikes. Sonic could still feel them on his cheek.

"What . . . ? Who are you?" the hedgehog asked.

"Where are my manners?" Robotnik butted in. "Sonic, meet Knuckles. He's my new BFFAE—best friend forever . . . and ever." The villain giddily tap-danced around the room.

"Look, Robotnik, I don't care who you've brought to help you. You're never going to get my power." Sonic's fur crackled with energy as he prepared to run straight through the Eggman's face and into the next county. But this other creature . . . this Knuckles had another idea.

"Do I look like I need *your* power?" he growled at Sonic as his fist sparked with a chaotic red energy like Sonic had never seen. This time, the punch wasn't a warning tap, and somehow Sonic couldn't outrun it. *Smash!* The force of the blow sent Sonic through a wall and out into the night.

"Have fun, you two!" Robotnik's voice echoed from the hole Sonic had just blown through the house. And in a moment, Knuckles had landed on top of him.

"Where is it?" the echidna practically barked.

"Where's what?" Sonic was genuinely confused. Robotnik had always wanted *his* power. That force inside of him that gave him his speed. How could he give that up?

"WHERE IS IT???" Knuckles bellowed again, punching the ground so hard its shockwaves sent Sonic flying off the shattering patio.

Sonic looked up with hazy vision and saw what he now knew were his two greatest enemies in the world towering over him.

"So nice when diabolical evil lives up to the hype," Robotnik laughed.

"You talk too much." Knuckles' eyes were fixed on Sonic with rage. "Give it to me!" he demanded once more.

"You asked for it . . ." Sonic breathed deep and charged up for his signature attack. He crouched into running position while this red bully continued to taunt him.

“I was expecting more from you. You’re unskilled, untrained . . . and unworthy.”

“But I’m not going down without a fight!” Sonic cried, and spun into a sparking spin ball for a full-velocity attack. But Knuckles stopped him dead! He twirled Sonic’s body like a basketball. The momentum was sickening. Was this what people meant when they talked about motion sickness? Somehow Knuckles’ powers perfectly pushed back on Sonic’s own abilities.

Crunch! The echidna body-slammed the hedgehog to the ground and then picked him up by the neck. Sonic struggled as he stared down his adversary, but he wouldn’t show any fear. “It is my destiny to do what my ancestors could not—to restore the ultimate power to the home of my people!” Knuckles recited the words like a prophecy.

“Ultimate power, you say?” Robotnik was almost startled at the words. It was Sonic’s opening. He had to get them distracted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about . . . You’ve got the wrong guy!” The hedgehog reached his hands toward the rubble. He saw his satchel, blown outside in the shockwave and tangled in a mess of broken furniture.

“Don’t play dumb with me.” Knuckles shook him hard. “Child of Mobius. Apprentice of Longclaw.”

“You knew Longclaw?”

“Longclaw and her people were the sworn enemy of my proud echidna tribe. We fought and died at their hands, and now you will die at mine.” Knuckles squeezed Sonic’s throat, and the world around Sonic started spinning into darkness.

Wee-oooo! Wee-oooo! Sonic never guessed that the last noise his brain would produce was identical to the Green Hills police car siren, but there it was ringing in his brain. Wait. That wasn’t just in his head! The siren was in the air. The squad car crashed through the fence and—*Wham!*—directly over Knuckles’ smug bully face.

Sonic struggled to his feet and heard a young voice with a tone of amazement in its words. “Aw, man, I need to recalibrate these brakes. Do you think he’s okay?”

Glancing up at the revving car, Sonic beheld a kid just a shade younger than himself. It was a young fox, and it reached out from the car's driver's seat with an open hand. "Get in!" he said. "I'm on your side!" Sonic grabbed his satchel and followed the fox's lead.

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CHAPTER 6

Sonic had to think fast. Somehow, Robotnik escaped Mushroom Planet—and he brought a friend with him. It was too wild to think about!

Speaking of friend, Knuckles was surely on their trail by now, but whatever powers the echidna had to block Sonic's speed, he didn't seem to travel so fast himself.

"Wow! Let me just say that it is an honor to finally meet you, Sonic. Is it okay if I call you Sonic?" The fox chattered away as he whipped the squad car through the neighborhood at one hundred miles an hour. "Everyone calls me Tails. You're probably wondering why."

"Because of the extra tail?" Sonic guessed as the furry twin appendages wagged behind Tails.

"That's right! I should have known you'd get it."

"Cool. Very cool," the hedgehog said, and took a deep breath. "Also: WHAT IS GOING ON?! Robotnik is back? And who is Clifford, the big red rage monster?"

"That's Knuckles. He's the most dangerous warrior in the galaxy. He thinks you're the key to finding the Master Emerald." Tails spoke like these were commonly known facts. Like this craziness was no different than knowing what was on TV that night.

"The Master Emerald?" Sonic recalled the term from his childhood; legends that Longclaw would tell him. "That's just a bedtime story."

"No, it's real. It's just been hidden. And its location is the most closely guarded secret in the universe," Tails said. "I should know. I think I'm one

of the few left still looking for it.”

The fox sped the borrowed cruiser toward the center of town, but it still wasn’t as fast as Sonic was. He just needed to clear his head and then he could set out on his own. A hero didn’t need to involve anyone else in his danger—not even the only other person who had any idea what was going on.

“I’m picking up an energy signal.” Tails checked a handheld device that booped rapidly. “Knuckles must be pursuing us. We’ve got to make a move!” Ahead, a blinking traffic light turned red.

“Red light! Red light!” Sonic shouted, and pulled the wheel hard. They swerved around the corner just in time to miss oncoming traffic. And in the rearview, Sonic saw Knuckles for a split second. He was galloping along down the street, his fists digging chunks out of the pavement.

“Maybe we can lose him?” the hedgehog mused.

Sha-Boom! The red menace smashed through a water truck behind them, bursting the tranquility of Green Hills and sending townsfolk screaming. “This is ridiculous! I could get out and run faster than this!”

“I’m on it!” Tails grabbed Sonic by a wrist excitedly. “Just don’t go anywhere. Promise? Promise you won’t go anywhere?”

“Yes! Yes!” he hurriedly said as Tails ducked under the console of the squad car. “What are you doing under there?”

“Upgrades!” Tails called back. “This law vessel has plenty of capacity for raw power, but it needs to be more properly distributed to all the wheels. Hold on to your quills!” Tails popped up, cranked a gizmo he’d plugged into the motor, then Sonic watched the background recede in a blur. Knuckles was there for a moment but seemed to dive off the street in the wake of their hyperboosted descent.

Sonic slid over and took the wheel. He steered them up the winding paths that led into the mountains and out of town. “Now that we’re out of harm’s way for a moment, could you explain how you know so much about me?”

“Are you kidding?” Tails was practically hopping up and down on the seat. “Everyone knows about Sonic the Hedgehog! I’ve spent my whole life

learning about you. And when I found out Knuckles was trying to track you down, I came to Earth to help you stop him."

"But why does everyone think I'm the key to finding the Emerald?"

"Because Longclaw was the keeper of the Emerald's secret," Tails explained. "For centuries, her Owl Tribe sought to control the Emerald's Chaos Powers. But eventually, they came to see it as unstable, and they hid it somewhere even their greatest enemies wouldn't look. But you . . . you were supposed to be different. Longclaw's final protégé . . . her greatest discovery. They say you can harness the Emerald's energy like no one before. So it must be here on Earth!"

Sonic stared into the distance, scarcely believing this could be true.

"She didn't tell you about any of this?" Tails asked after an awkward pause.

"No! All I got from her was a bag of rings, her undying love, and an old map."

"A map?" The fox lit up.

WUNK.

Impossibly, Knuckles' fist dug deep into the passenger door, and in one smooth motion, the echidna shredded the door entirely. With eyes that burned like fire, he reached in for Sonic.

"This guy is so obsessed with me!" Sonic cried as he pulled the wheel wildly across the road, shaking their pursuer loose for just a moment.

Tails turned to Sonic as Knuckles' one remaining grip on the doorframe twitched in the corner of his eye. "I've got an idea. Do you trust me?" he asked.

"NO!" the hedgehog replied, but it was too late for protests at this point.

Tails yanked hard on the wheel the other way, shooting the car off the road and toward a thick metal guardrail along the edge of a cliff. It hit with incredible force, and the sound of twisting metal and shattering glass was only barely tamped down by Sonic's screams as the damaged vehicle launched off the cliff.

Knuckles let go at last, digging his fists deep into the rocky cliffside. But there was no way for Sonic to jump out of the the car safely. The

ground below began to rush up as they plummeted. The car fell and burst into flames far below.

"AHHHHHH!" Sonic screamed, his eyes shut tight. But when he realized he didn't die, he opened one eye to discover . . . "We're flying?"

Tails' two tails were more than just for looks! He had grabbed Sonic before the car crashed to the ground. The tails spun around like chopper blades, holding both creatures aloft. "Did your butt just turn into a helicopter?" Sonic asked, gobsmacked.

"Ha! Butt-copter! Only Sonic the Hedgehog could come up with something like that!" the kid shouted. "So do you have somewhere safe we can go?"

"Yeah," Sonic said, ready to put them back on path to survival. "I know a place."

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CHAPTER 7

Never having stooped to the level of doing manual labor like yard work, Robotnik had assumed the riding mower would move faster than twelve miles per hour. But as he rattled away from the Wachowskis' pitiful abode on that pathetic contraption, his control pad finally reconnected to the planet's web of wireless signals. It was time for Robotnik to get his mojo back.

"If you want something done right, you gotta hire someone you can push around," the scientist said, and slashed in the code for an invasive, data-sweeping algorithm. Nothing could hide his target from him now. But even Robotnik was surprised to find that the lackey he was looking for was right there in Green Hills . . . at something called the Mean Bean Café.

Robotnik autodialed the number. It took three rings for someone to pick up . . . far too long a lag time.

"Mean Bean," came a voice that Robotnik had been belittling in his dreams for months. "Barista Stone speaking."

"Hey, pencil-neck! Where's my coffee?!" came an agro voice in the background. Probably a slack-jawed stooge like a trucker, knowing this dump of a town.

Robotnik growled one command into the line and let the natural hierarchy of his world fall into place. "Prepare my latte!" was all it took, and Agent Stone's voice perked up with a new, robot-like urgency. "Sorry, folks. I have to close early."

“I’ll leave when I’m ready, twerp,” the trucker’s voice snapped back. He didn’t know what he was in for.

“I didn’t want to have to do this . . . ,” Stone’s icy voice said, and with a loud *chop!* the line was overwhelmed with the screams of would-be interlopers. After a moment, Stone whispered into the line, “The goat’s milk is steaming, sir.” And then communications cut off.

The next part of Robotnik’s plan would require some more finesse. And so—despite his clear superiority—Robotnik did something he would never have dared before. He waited.

Arms akimbo, the doctor turned his head to the sky and counted the minutes. The indignity of this mower ride. The taste of stale mushrooms still on his tongue. In a moment, it would all be washed away with the arrival of his babies.

Bzzzzzzzz!

Yes, there they were in the distance now. Robotnik could hear their perfectly calibrated motors from miles away. His proudest creations. His deadly drones. His beautiful drones! From high in the sky, the red-eyed droids floated down and around him. They’d been set free from their secret satellite housing unit by Stone’s preplanned activation protocols. And now they could transform him back into the Robotnik he was made to be.

With a whirl of their jet-black metal bodies, the drones swirled around their master, replacing his tattered clothes with a flowing red flight jacket. They even styled his mustache so it was extra aerodynamic. And finally, several of the drones combined to create a floating throne for Robotnik to travel on in style.

Robotnik guided his new transport toward the burning site where all indicators showed his ally had failed. At the top of the cliff, he could hear the disgruntled strains of the bruising red alien called Knuckles as he clawed his way up the rock face and to the street. This muscle-bound miscreant was dangerous. Dangerous but useful. And Robotnik knew just how to play Knuckles to his advantage . . . the direct approach!

“So, my massively metacarpaled friend . . . you mentioned an ultimate power back at the house?” the scientist asked.

“The Master Emerald? It does not concern you. I got you off that planet of mushrooms, and you brought me to the hedgehog. We have no more use for one another.”

“Actually, I think we might . . . Earth is my turf.” Robotnik swept his gaze wide across the night sky. “I rule this terrestrial spheroid. I know every element, every phylum, every species that has ever slithered, buzzed, or dabbed on this planet.”

“I understand nothing you just said.”

“Allow me to explicate, annotate, and elucidate so that you may better postulate. If you remove *E* and *T* from ‘my planet,’ it spells ‘my plan.’ My planet, my plan! See? I help you retrieve this Emerald, and you use it . . . to destroy the hedgehog.”

“You’re suggesting an alliance?” Knuckles was finally beginning to grasp the situation . . . or at least as much of it as Robotnik would allow.

“The echidnas do not enter easily into such arrangements.” Knuckles beat his chest with bravado. “It requires the removal of our internal organs and the reinsertion of each inside the chest cavity of another.”

“Charming, but a tad invasive.” Robotnik floated his chair out of reach. “Around here we simply grip each other’s hands tightly.”

“That’s it? It seems very simplistic.”

“Well, I’ve always believed that less is more . . . AHHH!” The miscreant had crushed Robotnik’s own knuckles in its meaty white paw. “Ow! Ow! Ow! You truculent space bumpkin! You crushed my favorite hand!”

“Really? My hand is uninjured,” Knuckles said with a shrug. “But I am now convinced of your commitment.”

“Next time we swap organs!” Robotnik’s ego was bruised, but he had to keep his cool. Staying one step ahead was his only option to keep his plan in motion.

With the hedgehog having flown the coop, Robotnik determined their best bet was to build up capabilities at the Mean Bean. The place was a disgusting picture of traditional hometown values, but the doctor had faith there was more under the surface.

“You said you could find the hedgehog. Why are we wasting time at a common eatery?” Knuckles complained as they entered.

“Have faith, my contemptible compadre. If my hypothesis is correct, this wake-up joint is more like a sleeper cell . . .” And at that hint, Agent Stone stepped out from the back room, a look of giddy excitement on his face.

“Doctor! It’s really you!” he cried. “You look different . . .”

Robotnik brushed the tips of his sunburned mustache and considered his frame in his window reflection. He looked more roguish than he ever thought possible. “Papa’s got a brand new ’stache!” he beamed.

“And you’ve brought . . . some kind of space porcupine?”

“I am an echidna warrior, trained since birth in all forms of lethal combat, destined to restore honor to my tribe, and willing to destroy anything that gets in my way.” The echidna reached out and crushed Stone’s hand without blinking an eye. Robotnik’s underling fell to his knees in pain. An appropriate position, considering his place in the hierarchy.

“That means he trusts you, Stone,” the doctor said. “Now let’s renovate this dump!”

Stone stepped up to the chromium pipes of the café’s high-end coffee maker, placing his face in front of the main steamer where a red electric sensor was suddenly activated. The light of the retinal scan blinked up and down his eye, and in a moment, the tanks and fixtures of the machine began to shift and rotate, transforming into something completely new.

“I followed your instructions to a tee, sir,” Stone said as a computer screen emerged from inside the bean grinder. “From *The Robotnik Manifesto*, section five, article twelve: ‘In the event of my capture, disappearance, or account suspension on social media, construct a secure safe house built to my exact specifications and await my return.’ ”

He’d memorized it. A nice touch, but Robotnik was more impressed that the mobile command center that had just assembled itself in the coffee shop contained his sound system and treadmill. Even a genius needs to get his steps in.

“Sir, there is something you should know,” Stone said in a sheepish tone.

“Is there? Bring it.”

“After you vanished, the government dissolved all record of your identity.”

“What?!?” Robotnik was used to seething with anger at the rubes in Washington, but this was beyond the beyond. “Those mouth-breathing Penta-goons! They think they can make me disappear?!”

“They also froze our assets and bank accounts,” Stone said.

“That’s nothing a little ‘high tex-ploitation’ can’t solve!” Robotnik quickly hacked his way through a few dozen billionaires’ bank accounts for funds while Stone brought him a fresh latte. “They’ll never get away with it, sir,” he said.

“One step at a time, Stone.” Robotnik grinned, finally fully in his element. “A proper revenge on this planet and its feeble protectors requires direction, dedication . . . and one dead hedgehog.”

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CHAPTER 8

In his brief time on planet Earth, Tails had made a few critical observations. The animals in this world tended to walk on all fours. The humans left lights on all night in a stunning waste of energy. And for some reason, even people with a lot of friends needed space to be alone. That last one was the hardest idea to parse.

But that's just the kind of place Sonic had led him: a secret enclave. A world away from the world. Something he called "Wade's garage."

As they floated down toward the cube-shaped building and its retractable door, Tails nervously spotted its owner—the town's deputy sheriff. Wade was on his hands and knees again, trying to thread a chain through the gears of a bicycle.

"Steal my car if they will, but that won't keep this cop off the streets," the man mumbled to himself. "As soon as this bike is greased up . . . look out, jaywalkers!!"

"I've encountered this man before," Tails whispered as they walked up to the garage door. "He does not seem familiar with basic mechanical operation."

"Who, Wade?" Sonic said. "Don't underestimate him."

"OW! That pinches!" Wade cried as his fingers got caught up in the bike chain.

"Don't overestimate him, either," Sonic said, and led the fox into the dimly lit workshop. "Hey, Wade! You all right over there?"

“Hey, Sonic. Everything’s great, man. Just fixing up the old bika-roony,” the man said, spinning a wheel. “Thought I might get myself back in shape. Plus, someone maybe kind of stole the squad car.”

Tails hid behind his hero. Sonic seemed to treat the native humans so kindly. It was clear the fox was going to need a new approach to repair his connection to this world.

“So, Wade . . . I want you to meet Tails. He’s not from around here, like me.”

“Is your headquarters secure?” Tails immediately began scanning the workshop with his devices. If he could prepare the garage for a siege battle, it might make up for the car.

“This place? Super secure,” said Wade. “Nobody gets in or out—except my mom. And the worst thing she’ll do is try to make us a snack plate. Welcome to the Wade Cave . . . which is something I hope I can say to a girlfriend someday.”

Tails took the map out of Sonic’s satchel and spread it across a makeshift table in the center of the room. In the light, the fox could see its stated purpose: pictures of worlds within worlds. Every habitable planet on this side of the universe was represented by visual markers. Looking at these would allow anyone who bore warp rings to teleport across the stars. It could have helped Tails when he was searching for Sonic, but tech had always been the fox’s strong suit. And he knew he could put that to good use now.

“I always just thought this was a map of places I could hide . . . and other weird things I didn’t understand at all,” Sonic said.

“It’s more than that.” Tails leaned in close to examine some shimmering ancient writing along the map’s edge. “Watch this. Hold it up to the moonlight.” Tails and Sonic lifted the map up to the window, and as the beams of moonlight shone through, they amplified the writing. It was as if they were charging ancient electrical circuits embedded in the paper. And the circuits in turn projected the shape of a familiar owl into the air above their heads.

“Longclaw . . . ,” Sonic said in an awed tone.

“Hello, Sonic,” the wise owl began. “If you’re watching this, then something has happened to me. I’d hoped to tell you this story when you were older, but it appears fate has chosen a different path . . . Ages ago, a fearsome group of warriors known as the echidnas gathered the seven Chaos Emeralds, gems of extraordinary power. In their quest for strength, they combined them with the Master Emerald, creating the most unstoppable weapon ever created.

“With this power, a single warrior could defeat entire armies. It amplifies what’s in your heart, good or evil. It turns thoughts into reality.

“Believing no one should have that power, my ancestors stole the Emerald and hid it. The secret of its location was passed down generation to generation, hero to hero. I am all that remains of my order. All except for you, my good-hearted little Sonic. Use this map. Find the Master Emerald and protect it. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you, Sonic.”

Longclaw’s image faded away, and the trio stood in awed silence.

“Can you play that again?” Wade said at last. “I got, like, none of that.”

“She means that the Master Emerald is the ultimate concentration of power in the known universe,” Tails explained. “And only Sonic has the power to track it, contain it, and keep it away from Knuckles and this Robotnik. All we’ve got to do is follow these directions.” Tails tapped the map with a small tool, sending a current through its advanced circuitry. The parchment transformed before them into a new kind of map . . . a map full of mountains, oceans, and more recognizable elements.

“Whoa,” said Wade, for once echoing what they were all feeling. “Is this where you guys come from?”

“No,” Sonic said. “This is Earth.”

“Looks like the first clue is hidden in these mountains in eastern Siberia.” Tails quickly compared the diagram to a chart on his tracker device. “There we’ll find a compass that will guide us to the location of the Emerald.”

Sonic crossed his arms. “There’s still so much I don’t understand,” he said. “Knuckles mentioned something about . . . Mobius?”

“The traditional home of our kind,” Tails said. “If Knuckles gets his hands on the Emerald, it’s not just this world that will be in trouble, Sonic.

They say the Master Emerald grants its bearer power to bring anything they think into reality. But it's too chaotic. That's why Longclaw's tribe hid it. No one can hold that power and remain uncorrupted."

"If Knuckles gets the Emerald, he'll finish what his ancestors started and conquer the entire universe," Sonic said. "Too bad for him he can't catch me in a million years."

Seeing his hero boast like that made Tails beam. He knew he'd made the right choice to come. "Now all we have to do is get to the compass before Knuckles can attack."

"I knew a Knuckles in middle school," Wade said, trying to be involved. "He could put his whole fist in his mouth. If this is the same guy, we are screwed."

"Not the same guy—though your Knuckles also sounds bad. But ours is worse," Sonic said. "And he's got an evil supergenius helping him. We have to get the Emerald before they do. And we have to keep this a secret. Understand that, Wade? I won't put Tom and Maddie in harm's way. That's not what heroes do. I gotta go at this alone."

"Maybe you could use a handy fox?" Tails asked, and when Sonic nodded, the fox was filled with an electric feeling all his own. Their adventure was just beginning, and Sonic promised his number one fan, "I'll find a way for both of us to get there."

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CHAPTER 9

Sonic had been all around the world. He'd rolled down the great pyramids of Egypt. He'd done loop-the-loops along the curves of the Golden Gate Bridge. He'd even shredded a few sick snowboard tricks in the powder on the mountains near home. But Siberia? A land of perpetual ice and no chili dogs for thousands of miles was *not* his idea of a hot vacation spot.

And sure, he and Tails were able to pinpoint a general area in the Russian wasteland that corresponded with the clue on their new map, but the ring he activated from his satchel still dumped them in the middle of nowhere. They were likely miles off the mark in one of the worst blizzards Sonic had ever seen.

"I absolutely cannot find my way! We'll never get there!" Sonic moaned. At least they had bundled up with a pair of oversize overcoats and hats that protected their bodies *and* their identities. But warm clothing couldn't cover up one concrete fact. "We are completely, totally, unequivocally lost!"

Tails slapped a hand on the side of his chaos tracker device. "In this weather, there's no way we're gonna get readings on this thing. Should we go back?"

"No. There's a light up ahead. Maybe we can take shelter in there!" In the distance, Sonic could make out a tavern in the snow. It was a broken shack of a bar. The kind of place you'd never take a date. The kind of place that Sonic naturally meshed with.

As they approached, the hedgehog wove his way through dogsleds. “Listen, I’ve been in a place like this before, and things get rough *very* quickly. Just follow my lead and we’ll be okay. Got it?”

“Got it,” said Tails.

They stepped into the dim light of the bar and kept their heads low. They were already the shortest creatures in the place. Sonic couldn’t risk their real forms freaking out the locals . . . especially locals like these. A quartet of gamblers crowded a green-topped table—one of them with a wicked scar across his face. Even the bartender had an eye patch. And in the corner, the world’s most unsettling granny knitted a shawl showing an ax splitting a skull.

“Thanks, we’ll try the next nightmare barn . . . ,” Tails said, and turned to go out.

“C’mon, Tails.” Sonic pulled his partner back. “We’re going in. Just be careful that we don’t end up as the blue plate special.”

A scowling waitress dropped two brown paper menus on their laps and asked something in Russian. Sonic didn’t understand the words, but the tone felt somewhere in between “What do you want?” and “How should I hurt you?” The hedgehog quickly called up all the Russian words he knew.

“Uh, we’ll take two borschts on rye, please!” he stammered.

Quirrp?

Tails produced another of his gizmos; this one had a little spinning speaker at its center. “Two beef stews, please,” the little fox said into the device, and in short order, a flat voice translated the order into Russian. The waitress seemed satisfied at least and went off toward the kitchen.

“Man, where’d you get all these cool gadgets?” Sonic asked.

“I invented them.” Tails shrugged sheepishly. “It’s kind of my thing.”

“Pretty impressive.”

With a cold clatter, two bowls of gray slop landed on the table before them. The waitress stood with hands on hips, staring the two down with disgust. Tails picked up a bare set of fish bones from within his soup. “I’m sorry, but I asked for the beef stew.”

Quirrp! Queep!

His little device ran the comment through and spat out some more Russian. This time, it did not seem to do the trick. In fact, the waitress was highly offended by whatever the machine translated. Sonic couldn't tell what she was talking about, but his best guess was, "How dare you insult my beloved grandmother!"

"There must be some confusion. I just mean that this isn't what I ordered!" Tails said in a nervous hurry. With another *Quoorp!* the machine recited more Russian, and now half the bar was looking at them with angry eyes.

"Dude, what is going on?" Sonic asked.

"I don't know!" Tails fiddled quickly with the device as the men at the poker table rose up and shouted what must have been something like, "Who said our mothers were three-legged goats?!"

Sonic stepped in their way, a cool smile on his face. "Okay, take it easy!" he said, hands up. "I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for whatever my friend said or did."

Quip-pip-puuurrrp! The gizmo sputtered out like a fart, and with a last few lines of broken Russian from its speaker, the locals went wild. They tore at Tails' and Sonic's coats, exposing the two creatures for the very much nonhumans that they were.

"C'mon, guys! Why does this kind of misunderstanding always happen to me?" Sonic laughed as the crowd of ruffians pushed them into a corner.

Tails flipped through the screen of another device pulled from his bag of tricks and shouted, "Pivonka! Pivonka!"

The crowd stopped. In a snap, their faces went from rage to bemused wonderment.

"Uh, Tails? What does 'Pivonka' mean?" Sonic nervously called over his shoulder.

"I just looked up 'Siberian conflict resolution' in my intergalactic glossary, and . . . uh-oh." Tails' face went slack. "As a custom for solving disputes, it's . . . it's a dance battle."

From behind the mob of humans, a towering figure emerged. He wore a shimmering track suit that barely stretched over mountains of muscle. As he

smiled, a gold tooth glittered, and he said, “Da . . . Pivonka!” The crowd erupted into cheers at the arrival of their apparent dance champion.

“Tails, what did you just get us into?” Sonic asked as the floor was cleared of tables to form a makeshift battleground.

“This says if we win, they let us go. But if we lose, it’s into the fire.”

“We have to grab the map and get out of here.” Sonic dug through his satchel and came up short. “But where is the map?!”

“I left it on the table—oh no!” Tails was panicking. “What do we do?”

Sonic stretched his legs, furrowed his brow, and felt the groove of the ancient Soviet techno tune pumping out of the jukebox. “We dance,” he said. “And then we get the map and get out of here.”

The dance battle was fierce. Two of the gamblers from the table spun onto the floor in perfect synchronization as they kicked at each other, mock-slapped each other, and even flipped each other in flawless form.

Sonic and Tails stepped up in response . . . and tripped over each other’s feet.

“BOOOO!” the crowd taunted as the first round clearly slid out of their reach. As the next song changed to a traditional Russian number, another set of dancers arrived, their arms crossed on their chests and their eyes intense beams of hatred.

“Follow my lead!” Sonic called, guessing where this was going. He crouched low and started busting out his own set of squat kicks with Tails struggling to keep pace. The Russians got lower and lower, kicking out their boots in perfect unison, getting closer and closer to Sonic and Tails until they collided! Boots flew fast, smacking bystanders in the face. At best, the round was a draw, but the audience was as bloodthirsty as ever.

In the excitement, Sonic saw the map fluttering at the edge of their table across the room. “The map!” he called. “Let’s grab it!”

But as they dove for the prize, another of the burly bar regulars snapped it up and held it high. “You want this?” he taunted. “Come get it . . . you freaks!” The crowd started to chant, “Freaks! Freaks! Freaks!” And Sonic could tell that the taunts touched a part of Tails that was deep in his heart. The fox withered to a miserable state.

“Come on, Tails! I need you here!” Sonic called.

“I can’t do it, Sonic! I’m not brave like you. My gadget got us into this mess, and I lost your map . . . and now we’re gonna get tossed into the fire!”

Sonic rushed to his new friend’s side. “Come on, pal. I’ve got a plan, but I need your help. You with me?” Tails nodded his head slowly, then Sonic whispered the plan in his ear. Step one in executing his scheme saw Sonic quickly switching the jukebox to some real American dance grooves.

Sonic took to the floor and pushed back the crowd with a wicked spin. And with enough space cleared, he was able to kick up every pop, lock, shuffle, and shake he’d learned from years spent alone binging music videos in a cave. Sonic slid his feet across the floor and went into another spin, twirling faster and faster until the crowd grew dizzy watching his hyperfast moves. His quills even started to electrify as he turned into a pure tornado of dance.

And then it was time for Tails’ part. After recording Sonic’s sweet routine with one of his holographic gadgets, Tails began to project image after image of Sonic rocking out onto every corner of the bar. Before long, there was nowhere a person could look without seeing the spinning hedgehog.

The motion was too much for the Siberians as one by one they fell to the ground. Several dove toward the bathrooms to toss their cookies. By the end of the song, only the map holder still stood, but his knees were weak. As the song reached its crescendo, the hedgehog did a somersault over the heads of his holographic counterparts and landed at the man’s feet. With a simple blow from his lips, the exhausted bully finally collapsed. The map was theirs again, and so was the Pivonka!

Later on, the fire had burned down to embers. The Russians were either passed out or moved on, and Sonic and Tails lounged in a back corner, relieved to have survived.

“Thanks for having my back, Sonic,” the fox said. “Earth seems like a tough place to be on your own.”

“Stick with me, pal. I know everything about this ol’ pale blue dot.”

“Do you really mean that? About me being your pal?”

“Sure, buddy!” Tails wrapped his arms around Sonic in a fierce hug.

“Whoa. Take it easy!”

“Sorry,” Tails said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Growing up, I didn’t have any friends. Everyone in my village thought my two tails were weird.”

“I know that feeling.”

“I hated being different. But then I heard about you. The fastest creature in the galaxy. You were weird, too, but you were a legend! It made me think that maybe being weird wasn’t so bad. You inspired me, Sonic—inspired me to leave my village and come here to help you in your mission.”

Sonic looked at him. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but he didn’t think he could have come this far without the little guy’s help.

“I’m glad you’re here, Tails,” he said finally. “But we might as well get some sleep, and this feels as good a place as any to spend the night. Maybe you can get some clear readings on the Emerald once the storm has blown over.” And with that, they settled into a restless slumber. Tails’ tails stuck out from the blanket and wrapped around Sonic, keeping him warm.

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CHAPTER 10

As a noonday sun crested the peaks higher up in the mountains, the snowstorm had finally calmed. They were close. Sonic knew it. He could feel something calling to him down in his quills.

“I pinpointed the coordinates! It’s right up ahead!” Tails called, floating in the air above. He held a solid grip on Sonic, his twin tails spinning away. Gliding across the frigid sky, the pair swung toward the face of the mountain, where a deep crevasse was cut into the granite.

As they flew in, the lights of Tails’ tracking device began to shine off the walls, and it was clear that this was no ordinary cave. It was a temple. Hidden deep within the rock who knows how many years ago when the Owl Tribe had visited Earth for a time.

When they landed inside the cavern, Tails turned on a portable light. In front of them, ornate carvings of owl warriors battling against spiny-haired figures covered a wall in a massive single scene. It was like a memory pulled from Sonic’s nightmares, reliving the day he lost Longclaw forever.

“It says here the owls and echidnas have been fighting each other for centuries,” Tails said.

“Like Vin Diesel and the Rock,” Sonic joked, trying to cover up the discomfort he felt.

“And now Knuckles is the last echidna left.”

“The last of his kind,” Sonic said in a whisper. “So he’s been all alone . . .”

They came to the end of the cave, and above them loomed a huge owl statue under a ceiling of sharp stalactites. At the base, Sonic could make out the carved shape of an Emerald in the stone—one with familiar symbols around it. “I’ve seen these symbols before . . . and I know where!” he realized.

Taking out their map, Sonic traced a finger over the same set of symbols, just in a different configuration. With a trembling hand, he reached out and turned the stone versions like keys to match the map. *Whoom!!* The Emerald carving lit up green along with the eyes of the great owl. The sound of ancient stones grinding together echoed as the owl’s chest opened up—ice and dust floating off its wings—and from within the chest floated something else . . . something small.

“A compass!” Sonic cried as the item lowered itself to their level. He snatched up the device, and as the light from the owl faded, the compass began to glow with its own energy, revealing an expansive map of the Earth in a similar projection to the electric letters on the map.

“This will lead us to the Emerald!” Tails realized.

Sonic felt a sense of relief as he looked into the excited eyes of his young companion. But what was that on Tails’ head? It looked like . . . a red light!

“Tails, look out!” Sonic yelled, tackling Tails just before the laser sight of Robotnik’s drones opened fire on the fox’s face.

“RUN!” Sonic commanded, and sprinted off through the cave, nearly a dozen drones flying after them. It was the Eggman’s drones. They’d been found!

SHOOOOM!

A miniature missile rocketed over their heads and struck the arch that made the cave’s entryway. Their window outside collapsed into a hundred pounds of snow, ice, and rock. They were trapped!

“Yodel-ay-hee-hooooooo!” cried a familiar, blustery voice from above. “Heads up, my little stalagmites!”

In the gloom, Sonic made out the figure of Robotnik bursting through the ice sheets above their heads. He rode in a massive egg-pod with turrets

of guns and razor-sharp claws spinning all around its body. “Thanks for all your hard work,” the mad scientist cried.

“But *we’ll* take it from here!” came the voice of Knuckles from behind Robotnik. The echidna crashed to the ground and swung out massive fists in Sonic’s direction, practically clawing after the compass.

“How’d you find us?” Sonic asked.

“You’ve been walking around with a tracking beacon,” Robotnik sneered as he hovered closer. Sonic checked his quills but found nothing. “It’s your phone, you furry little dimwit! Consider yourself triangulated, extrapolated, and about to be . . . eliminated.”

“You sound pretty smart, but it’s hard to take you seriously with those snotcicles in your mustache,” Sonic smirked. “Seriously, what kind of genius shows up to Siberia in an open canopy?”

“The kind of genius who can heat things up with the flick of a switch!” replied Robotnik, and with just such a motion, a fiery missile rocketed out of the egg drone directly at Sonic, who redirected the missile in a blue blur in Knuckles’ direction. But it did no good. Sonic watched the grim echidna gracefully sidestep the threat. And that left it nowhere else to go but . . .

KRA-KOOOOOOM!

The missile exploded directly at the base of the owl statue. The whole room shook. For once, everything around Sonic was a blur in a bad way. The only thing he could clearly see was the statue as it collapsed and shattered into nothing but dust. A thousand years of history gone. And it was all his fault.

“Stuff it, Eggman!!” Sonic roared. As electric blue energy crackled about him, he spun into a furious ball and launched himself directly at Robotnik. Sonic ricocheted between the drones, unfurled his body, and grabbed a wide piece of drone shell, slicing it into the scientist’s instruments. Then he blasted off the new egg-pod and toward a hole in the ceiling.

“Tails! Come on!” he called as he burst through a final sheet of thin ice and into the open air.

Tails soon zipped out overhead, flying down the mountain a heartbeat ahead of the villains. But Sonic had a better idea. Landing his red sneakers

squarely in the center of his drone-shell weapon, he turned it into a makeshift snowboard. Sonic shredded his way down the mountain at top speed.

Sonic looked back to see a fleet of drones pouring out of the hole. Holding the compass, he knew they'd never let him go without a fight. Through the wind and snow, he could just make out the red form of Knuckles—cold and cruel as always. The echidna had crunched his own slice of shell into a board and was now cruising down the mountain in wordless fury.

"Has anyone ever told you you've got real anger issues?" the hedgehog called out.

"Surrender the compass! You stand no chance against me!" Knuckles was gaining on him now. "I've been training for this my entire life!"

"I have no training at all, and yet here I am ahead of you." Sonic waved the compass in a taunt. "That must be so embarrassing!"

The two began to sway back and forth along the slope in a wicked cat-and-mouse chase. The echidna started digging his fists into the mountainside to push himself closer and closer. Trees and boulders alike fell as he dug his way right on top of Sonic.

"Up here!" Tails called from above Sonic's head.

The hedgehog tossed the compass up toward his partner, and it floated in his vision as if in slow motion . . . until Robotnik swiped it away! "Later, haters!" he cackled, and piloted his way into another deep crevasse. They followed as fast as they could.

In the cave they continued their ski-slope-style battle, accelerating the pace of the back and forth. Tails took off after Robotnik.

"Give up, fox, before I stuff your tails and hang them on my wall!" Robotnik jeered his way around columns of stone.

"Sorry, you're breaking up!" Tails mocked the villain, almost like Sonic would have. "I think your tech has a glitch!" With a few quick button mashes on one of his tool belt's endless gadget supply, the kid managed to remotely take control of the egg-pod!

"Welcome to Tails Mountain," the fox said, mimicking a theme park host as he guided Eggman around like a pinball. "For your safety, please

keep your arms, legs, and creepy facial hair inside the ride at all times!" In a final move, Tails twisted the pod upside down and collected the compass as it fell from Robotnik's hands!

"What have you done to my baby?" the scientist screamed. "You think you can outsmart me? I'm the outsmarter! Nobody outsmarts the outsmarter!" And with the flick of a button, a volley of missiles erupted through the cave. One finally blew up next to Tails!

"Tails, no!" Sonic cried, still taking a pummeling from Knuckles' big fists.

An unconscious Tails crashed into the snow, compass sliding out of his hand. Both rolled down the slope of the mountain, getting closer and closer to a sharp drop off a cliff! Sonic couldn't lose his new friend *and* the only key to the Master Emerald! He had to get them back at all costs.

Sonic and Knuckles rode their boards inches from each other, their eyes locked on the compass. They both burst out of the mountain at top speed. But just before Sonic could break away, a stray boulder barreled out of the cave and struck his satchel. The bag flopped open, spilling his collection of rings across the snow and down into darkness!

Sonic regained his footing just in time to see Knuckles reaching out for the compass. They were all just at the cliff's edge, and the hedgehog had to make the most difficult decision of his life: save the compass or save Tails. It really wasn't a choice at all.

"Gah!" he cried, and swung one arm out for the fox and dug another into the snow for stability. Sonic had his friend. Tails wasn't moving, but he was breathing. He was okay—for now. The weight of two creatures slowed down the rapidly fraying snowboard to a stop, just inches from peril.

Sonic heard something coming down the mountain behind them.

Rrrrrrrrrumble!

It was an avalanche!

"Enjoy the powder!" laughed Robotnik as the scientist grasped Knuckles *and* the compass in his egg-pod.

"Tails! Wake up! You gotta fly us outta here!" Sonic screamed into the fox's ear, but there was no response. Sonic reached into the satchel that flapped in the wind over his shoulder. No luck! In the fight, he'd dropped

all his rings! Not a single warp portal was in his hands now. All he had left was a phone . . . the thing Robotnik had used to track them down.

What good could a phone do when they were about to be buried alive?

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CHAPTER 11

Tom was feeling great. The sun glistened on the gorgeous Hawaiian beach. Maddie beamed as the maid of honor for her sister. And there were plenty of those great drinks in the coconut cups with the little umbrellas. The problems of Green Hills were hundreds of miles away.

Sure, there had been a few weird vibes over the weekend. Despite traveling by magic ring portal, Tom was feeling a little jet-lagged. Maddie's sister still hated him. And to top it off, there was something odd about the groomsmen. Four buff dudes in matching tuxedos and black wraparound shades kept staring him down like they shared one brain.

Whatever. Tom wasn't going to let it bother him. He'd done his one and only job for the wedding. He'd held the wedding rings for the morning and then tied them onto the little pillow Maddie's niece carried as she walked up the aisle. Easy peasy. Now all he had to do for the rest of the weekend was get another little coconut cup and watch the sun set into the ocean.

"And now, if we may have the rings?" asked the priest.

The ring bearer lifted the pillow up toward the bride and groom. The dearly beloved assembled in paradise held their breaths. It was perfect.

Twee-diddle-twee-diddle! Twee-diddle-twee-diddle!

Tom's phone rang, shattering the perfect moment. The bride shot him daggers.

"My bad!" Tom whispered at everyone. "I thought it was on silent!"

Hadn't it been? Tom suddenly realized that only the emergency calls he'd set up for Sonic would ring that loudly no matter what, and he dove

behind a nearby bush to answer. Crouching low, Tom swiped the screen live to a video call.

“This better be an emergency, Sonic! I just . . . Are you skiing?!” Tom saw snow whip across Sonic’s face as mountains flew by behind him. And was he holding an animal?

“Please, I need your help!” his hedgehog ward shouted. “Life or death stuff right now, Tom!”

“What is going on?!”

“I need you to use that ring I gave you to save me—right now!”

“I don’t even know where you are, Sonic!” Tom whisper-shouted, and prayed that the wedding party couldn’t hear him through the foliage.

“You just gotta picture where you want the ring to go,” Sonic said before waving his phone around, revealing a massive avalanche pouring toward them. “Picture this!!”

“Hold on!” Tom reached into his pocket and ran toward the beach. He tossed the single gold ring he had on his body into the air and thought of the horrifying scene on the phone . . .

And nothing happened.

“Did you throw it?” Sonic’s voice yelled urgently from the phone.

Tom reached down and picked up the very ordinary wedding ring off the ground. “Oh man!” he said. “The warp ring must have gotten mixed up with the wedding rings while I was holding them!”

“Then where is it now, Tom?!”

Tom realized the ring was in the worst possible place ever. It was about to be put onto Rachel’s finger.

“Hold tight! I got this!” he yelled to Sonic, and then slowly reentered the wedding, walking up the aisle.

“Excuse me! I need to see that ring,” Tom yelled out.

The entire wedding turned their heads toward him.

“Tom, I’m going to kill you,” Rachel said with a scary look in her eyes.

“Tom, what are you doing?!” Maddie said.

Undeterred, Tom walked up to the altar.

“I need that ring.”

“Tom, please sit down,” said Randall, the groom.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said, and he punched Randall in the face, the ring flying from his hand.

Tom snatched the ring out of the air and in an instant tossed it.

Zam!

A portal opened in the middle of the aisle, and it immediately spewed out a metric ton of snow right into the faces of the four men. They collapsed under its icy weight as the crowd screamed.

When the portal’s light faded away, Tom saw that Sonic had landed on top of the snow mound that now occupied half the wedding stage.

In the madness, Tom and Maddie both rushed to Sonic’s side.

“Sonic! Are you okay?!” he said.

“What’s happening? Are you hurt?” Maddie asked.

“I’m—I’m fine,” Sonic said, totally not fine.

“Okay, good,” Tom exhaled, and then sucked in a breath to scream out, “because you are SO GROUNDED! No screen time for a year! For TEN YEARS!”

“Tom, listen to me,” Sonic said with a more earnest look than any the kid had ever given him. “Robotnik is back on Earth, and he’s after a magic Emerald! The only way to find it is with a special compass that Robotnik has *right now*! So Tails and I need to get it back or the world is doomed!”

“All of this happened since yesterday?” Maddie asked.

Sonic reached into the pile of snow and pulled out the still-breathing body of what looked like a fox, but a humanoid, like Sonic. The kid groaned as Sonic turned him over, and Tom noticed two wet tails hanging off Sonic’s arm.

“Tails? Can you hear me?” Sonic said, and shook the fox gently.

Tom kneeled down and put his arm around the pair. “Don’t worry, Sonic. We’ll get him help. We’ll solve this.”

“How about *we* take it from here?” came a voice from behind them. Tom turned and saw a figure coming down the aisle toward him. He wore a Hawaiian shirt but walked like a soldier. This guy definitely wasn’t on the wedding’s guest list.

“Wait, I know you!” Tom realized. “You’re that Department of Defense spook who showed up last year after the battle in Green Hills. The one who

left us that high-tech walkie-talkie."

"Correct!" the man said. "Though I may have misled you on my credentials. My name is Commander Walters, and I represent the Guardian Units of Nations—a global task force created after the incident in San Francisco and dedicated to protecting Earth from alien threats." He flashed a badge with a spiked *G* at its center.

"Wait a minute . . . your organization is an acronym . . . for G.U.N.?!" Maddie said. "Who would call a spy organization G.U.N.? That doesn't even sound real!"

"It's totally real!" Walters snapped. "And as a federal agent, I'm calling jurisdiction on this site. We knew you were harboring this hedgehog creature, Wachowski, but we never thought you'd hand him over. So we had to set up this sting operation to draw him out of hiding."

"Sting operation?" Tom said, and then he realized . . . the groomsmen with the mystery blasters who were currently buried under a pile of snow. They were G.U.N. agents. That meant that the groom . . .

"You're a secret agent and you didn't tell me?!" the bride screamed, and began to beat her partner mercilessly.

"That's correct," Walters said. "The priest, the wedding band . . . even the groom! Every aspect of Operation Catfish was a complete fabrication. We had to ensure these alien threats were contained."

Slowly, arms began to move from within the snow mound. The "groomsmen" had come to and were rising to circle around Sonic and Tails, blasters ready.

"Tom?" Sonic called, clutching the fox tighter.

"You're making a mistake!" Tom called, and began to slug every agent in sight. A slippery wrestling match ensued, but before Tom could fight them all off, one leveled a blaster at Sonic, and *WHOOOM*! A laser net shot out, capturing the two aliens in its webbing. Tom screamed before two agents collapsed on him, wrestling him into a pair of handcuffs.

"Sonic isn't a threat! He's on our side!" Maddie pleaded with the commander. "You should be protecting the planet from Doctor Robotnik!"

"Robotnik is dead," Walters sneered.

“You’re wrong. He’s back. And you’ve just captured the only ones who can stop him!”

Commander Walters paused and then slowly spoke into a wrist communicator. “Sounds like Doctor Robotnik might be back in play. If he is, I want him found immediately!” he said. “And get me a helicopter evac for Wachowski and these aliens—immediately!”

The G.U.N. agents dragged Tom to his feet and pulled along Sonic and Tails like they were common animals and not the world’s only hope. Tom looked into Maddie’s eyes, powerless.

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CHAPTER 12

Robotnik's brain was on fire with the possibilities before him. Below, the roaring waves of the avalanche were burying his hated enemy. In his grasp was the key to lead him to the Master Emerald and ultimate power. He was so close to achieving his dream of a world destroyed by chaos and then perfectly reorganized by his intelligent design.

"He chose saving the fox over his compass," said Knuckles as he hung off the side of Robotnik's egg-pod.

"Of course he did." Robotnik brushed off his passenger's awe. "New friend, same pathetic weakness." Knuckles glared at him. "Which is completely unlike our friendship . . . one built on power and respect!" the doctor recovered quickly.

Knuckles turned the compass over in his hands. After pressing its center, a glowing globe spun to life in the air. It was a perfect jewel ready for the snatching—both the Emerald and this world.

"Tell me, my crimson companion . . . what's your endgame? What will you do with the power of the ultimate Chaos Emerald once it's in your swollen clutches, huh?" Robotnik fished for any additional info that could come in handy.

"I will return with the Emerald to my ancestral home, using its power to lift the capital temple of echidna society from the sinking ruin it's become and restore it to glory." The creature's eyes were fierce. "I warn you, I'm the last of my kind. The Master Emerald is my destiny. The only way to bring back my people."

“If that glowing orb of a compass is correct, this ring is our quickest path to the other side of the globe . . . where *your* Emerald awaits. Shall we?”

Knuckles reluctantly lifted a ring in the air and opened a portal to the South Pacific.

Zam!

They dropped from the portal and onto the peak of a tiny rock-covered island that jutted out of the Pacific Ocean. There was nothing else as far as the eye could see.

“This cannot be right,” said Knuckles. “Have we misread the compass?”

“I don’t misread. *Ever*. Look down.”

Knuckles held out the compass, and its laser lights focused themselves on a point going straight down. Beneath their feet, a stone marker protruded out amid the craggy natural landscape. Robotnik hated nature and all it stood for, but at least this spot held the potential for the sweet, sterile power of alien tech.

The echidna dropped from the egg-pod and landed atop the marker. “The carvings here match the key system used by my ancestors,” Knuckles said, fitting the compass into a wide divot in the stone.

Cha-Klang! Shooooooooom!

With a turn of the compass key, the entire island began to rumble. A whirlpool began swirling around the tiny island, and the ocean seemed to drain away around them. It revealed a massive structure of stone extending far beneath them. And then . . . *Foom!* A ray of bright green light shot from Knuckles’ marker and straight into the sky above.

“Holy Moses!” Robotnik cheered. “I’ve found it! Archimedes would be floating in his grave right now!” Knuckles’ eyes were steely, and he only scanned the depths of the churning water. Seriously, what was the fun in upsetting the balance of all life on planet Earth if you couldn’t gloat about it a little?

The pair grasped tightly to the peak of what was revealing itself to be a massive hidden structure. If the compass’s resting place was an Owl Tribe temple, this location was practically the lost city of Atlantis.

“Not much impresses you, does it?” Robotnik called to his emotionless echidna.

“We should retrieve the Emerald now!” Without another thought, Knuckles jumped down into a crevasse on the still-rising island’s rock face. Deep below, Robotnik could see the water draining from inside, and as he maneuvered his pod after the echidna, the details of an elaborate labyrinth came into focus.

His last remaining drones scanned the walls and fed him data on the underground maze. It was disgusting. Mossy living things. Carving after carving of majestic owls . . . those grotesque, pellet-pooping monstrosities. The walls of the labyrinth were a monument to wild, living things—the kinds of things his bots would someday replace with cold, metallic perfection.

The pathways in the labyrinth narrowed. Stinking, static water still pooled around Knuckles’ feet, but the creature dug forward with purpose. At this point, even Robotnik was beginning to lose his place.

“Hey, Knucklehead!” he called. “I know you’re dying to get your Emerald on, but could we be a little more mindful? A crumbling animal cage like this usually contains booby traps, and I’ve only got three drones left!”

K-tang! Crshhhhhhh!

A spear flew out of a side wall and cleaved a drone in half. Its finely tuned circuits spat hot sparks as its oil-hemorrhaging body crashed into the water below.

“Make that *two* drones!”

“Fear not, friend,” Knuckles said without looking back. “In a moment, I’ll have my Emerald, and balance will be restored to the Echidna Tribe *and* the universe.”

Click!

At that moment, he stepped on a pressure plate in the floor, setting off a series of booby-trap blades that sliced, diced, and dissected everything in the tunnel they could reach. Robotnik pushed his egg-pod ahead, tossing Knuckles into an open chamber just as the last of the blades chopped another of his drones in half.

“You see what I mean?!” the scientist cried before briefly regaining his composure. “Allow me to show you how you can work smarter, not harder.”

With a tap on his control pad, Robotnik commanded his last remaining drone to scan deeper into the rock of the labyrinth. In minutes, the computer had calculated every turn, tunnel, and trap in the place. It would be slow going, and Robotnik would have to stoop to traveling on foot. But they’d get there alive if his companion could hold his dang horses for once.

It took hours. They pressed deeper and deeper into the muck and mold of the hot and humid labyrinth until, with a glowing super punch, Knuckles broke through a stone wall and into the structure’s main chamber. And as the dust settled, there it was amid the gloom. Floating in the middle of the grand cavern . . . the green Master Emerald!

“At last!” Knuckles called.

“Ultimate power . . . ,” Robotnik said, grinning.

“Soon, order will be restored. Peace will be everlasting . . . all because of what we’ve done together.”

“Aww, such a lovely sentiment, Knuckles. I believe I feel a single tear forming,” Robotnik said as he snuck up behind the creature. Now was the moment to strike. The echidna was no longer of any use. In fact, he was the only thing standing between Robotnik and total domination.

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CHAPTER 13

In intergalactic animal society, there was no crime greater than keeping a creature bound in a cage. And despite years as an outsider to his own kind, Tails had never known this unique pain until he faded into consciousness somewhere warm—far and away from the wind and snow in Siberia.

As soon as Tails understood what he was being carried in, he faded back into a painful slumber. Was this all a dream? Had he even met his hero? Or maybe he was just the crazy freak everyone back home said he was.

“Come on! You can’t just leave us here! My friend is hurt. He needs a doctor . . . a vet . . . anyone!” a voice called out like a dream. In a nearby cage of his own, Sonic the Hedgehog called out to the wounded fox to no avail. “Tails, come on. You gotta wake up!”

“Poor little guy,” came the gentle voice of a man that must have been Sonic’s ally. “Who is he?”

“His name is Tails, Tom. He’s a genius. Brave. He came all the way to this world to find me . . . Tails is a lot like I was when I first came to Earth. All alone on a strange planet. Needing to find someone to believe in. A hero. Only I got lucky. I found Donut Lord. All Tails found was . . . me. Only Sonic the Hedgehog could have let him down this much.” Tails could hear the pain and tears in Sonic’s voice. Maybe this *wasn’t* just a bad dream?

“Listen, Sonic. You didn’t just find Donut Lord,” Tom said. “Donut Lord didn’t even exist until I found *you*. Until I finally found out how it felt

to be responsible for someone other than myself. That's what growing up is all about, pal."

The room that the three of them sat in came into focus: a small holding cell full of baggage. Tails weakly whispered the first thought on his mind. "The Emerald . . ." barely passed his lips when his world was rocked again.

BOOM!

The doors blew off the holding room as Sonic and Tom both shouted, "Maddie!"

In the smoldering hole, a human woman stood. Around her waist was Tails' tool belt. It was a good fit. "Come on," Maddie said. "We're busting out of here!"

"You're amazing, you know that?" Tom kissed her after she removed his handcuffs. "How did you pull this off?"

"It wasn't too tough. Been working my way with a little alien tech," she said, showing off a few of Tails' miniature explosives. "Whoever's responsible for these things really saved the day."

"That's this guy here. We call him Tails."

Maddie knelt down by Tails' cage and reached gently. "He's got a pulse, but it's weak," she said. "We need to move. Follow me, but this whole hotel is crawling with G.U.N. agents. I can target them with Tails' devices. That seems to be working so far."

Maddie sprinted into the hallway like a righteous warrior. She activated a pulse ray to lift furniture up off the ground and bowl over agents! In a flash, another gizmo magnetized their weapons, pulling the blasters out of G.U.N. hands and away from danger. She even snapped out bolo whips that tangled and tripped new waves of attackers.

Free of his cage, Sonic bounced from agent to agent as Tom sprinted along in their wake, cradling Tails' carrier. The group made their way to the exit, cut off by a final pair of burly G.U.N. agents. Maddie whipped out her last defensive device: a gumball-size black ball with only the barest hint of a switch on the outside. She pressed it but then held on . . . her first wrong choice!

"Get . . . rid of it . . . ," Tails called, but his voice was unheard in the chaos.

Beep-beep-beeeeeeeeeeeeep!

“What’s that supposed to mean? Beeping is bad!” Maddie said as the final wave of agents ran at them. “Sorry for whatever’s about to happen to you!” she said, and threw it right at them.

Fwump!

Suddenly, the ball burst into a massive wave of goo that quickly hardened around the agents, holding them fast against the wall. “This is gross.” Maddie shrugged. “More for you guys than me, but still.”

They ran outside toward the beach—anywhere that was away from their pursuers. Sonic picked up speed as they got back to the now deserted site of the wedding reception.

“Not so fast!” came a harsh military voice.

“This guy again?” Sonic groaned.

“Don’t roll your eyes at G.U.N. Commander Walters,” the man said in a pompous tone. “As soon as my men recover from your shenanigans and get these aliens into the hands of our scientists, I’ll be up for a promotion. Maybe even the presidency. Why not? I worked for it.”

“How about you work your way through this?!” Maddie shouted, and tossed the final goo bomb in her arsenal at him.

Walters dodged it. “Well, you forgot the first rule of warfare: Never bring a ball of exploding alien goo to a G.U.N. fight!”

“Oh, this little lady brought a gun,” Maddie said, and through the haze, Tails knew what she meant and felt afraid. It was the piece of his tool belt even he wasn’t sure should be used. “It’s just a very little gun. Sonic . . . think fast!”

Maddie flipped something off the end of the belt, and it flew into the air. Bouncing off a table, Sonic tipped the gizmo midair until it fell squarely into Tom’s hands. It was a gun . . . sort of? Probably only big enough to really fit in Tails’ hand. But Tom aimed it with every ounce of focus his small-town sheriff training provided him.

“Hands up, Walters!” Tom shouted.

“As if that squirt gun is anything compared to the authority my badge empowers me with!”

Zyark!!! The blaster shot went wide and completely atomized the wedding cake.

“Okay, so maybe it’s something compared to my badge.” Walters cowered, hands up.

“Hey, Tom?” Sonic whispered. “Do us all a favor and be careful with that.”

The team tied up Walters, but they were running out of time.

“How can we find where the compass was leading them without Tails?” Sonic asked his family.

FOOOOOOOM! Far out on the ocean, a bright beacon of green light split the sky in two.

“Well, that works, I guess,” Sonic said before shaking his head in dismay. “The compass has led them to the Emerald already.”

“As bright as that light is, it’s still got to be miles away on the open ocean. We’ll never get there in time,” Maddie said.

“*We* won’t,” Tom added. “But *you* can, Sonic.”

“Me? No way. You don’t know this Knuckles guy. He’s stronger than me, tougher than me—not as handsome, sure, but no one is the total package.” Sonic sighed. “I can’t do this, Tom. I’m just a kid!”

“No, you’re not ‘just a kid,’ Sonic,” Tom said, kneeling down. “Remember the last time you fought Robotnik? What did you say?”

“That his facial hair looked super creepy?”

“Not that. The other thing.”

“I said that this is my power, and I’m going to use it to protect my friends.”

“That’s right . . . because that’s what a hero does,” Tom said finally. “And if you keep ahold of that in your heart, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

Donut Lord was right! As Sonic hugged them goodbye and dug in for a run across the ocean, Tails realized he had to be a hero, too. He had to shake off his wounds. If he couldn’t help Sonic now, no one could. Clearing his mind of the haze, the fox started kicking at the door of his carrying cage just as Sonic zoomed into the distance.

“No, wait!” Tails finally called, though his voice was hoarse. “Don’t go, Sonic! I’m coming with you! You need . . .” But he was already gone—just

the trail of a blue electric blur on the horizon.

“Hey, hey, little guy. Calm down,” Tom said, wrapping an arm around Tails’ shoulder. “You can’t go after Sonic. You’re hurt.”

“But we have to help him,” Tails said firmly, his strength seeming to grow back inside of him. “You don’t know what he’s up against. He can’t do this alone.”

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CHAPTER 14

The water skittered underneath his sneakers, spewing out a massive spray in his wake. Steam mixed in as the friction of his feet boiled the ocean's surface like a pot on a stove. He always wondered if he could go fast enough to run on water. Now he knew. But he knew as well that one fall would see him crash beneath the waves . . . and he still couldn't swim.

But he had to push forward now on his own. He'd make it up to Tails for leaving the fox behind. He wasn't trying to do it all alone anymore, but he just didn't have a choice.

"Gotta go fast!" Sonic said as he pushed himself harder, covering the miles to that distant light in a matter of moments.

The wine-dark sea swelled angrily as he came closer and closer to the beacon. The green light poured out of the peak of a tiny rocky island. With the waves swirling around it, Sonic's tenuous balancing act was thrown for a loop. With each new step, his feet sunk just below the surface of the water before he launched off again. His balance became unsteady. The waters rose in violent waves.

And just as he reached the edge of the island's whirlpool, he finally made a fatal slip. For the first time in his life, Sonic lost his footing underneath him. He hit the water at over three hundred miles an hour, face-first! Like a skipping stone, Sonic skidded off the surface and into the air. His head took the brunt of the blow . . . until finally everything went black.

When he came to, Sonic was sure that he was at the bottom of a watery grave. But then he heard the gentle sound of water lapping at the shore. He

opened his eyes, and despite a pretty major pain in his neck, he seemed okay. Sonic struggled to his feet only to realize that hard rock stood beneath him. He was on the island. He'd made it!

From this vantage point, he saw how the ocean created a massive bowl of space, and in the midst of it all was not just an island but a temple city! With the green light of the beacon bursting forth from its summit just behind Sonic's head, the temple seemed to go on forever deep into the earth below.

And if that's where Robotnik and Knuckles had gone, it's where he would go, too.

Sonic jumped down the closest hole he could and plummeted into darkness. His feet hit a slick patch of stone, and suddenly Sonic was riding down a chute of pouring water. He set out his hands and surfed his way down and out over the edge of a waterfall, launching off the lip of the spout just in time to avoid another swim trap.

He landed in a gigantic room—clearly the entry to the labyrinth. A giant owl statue loomed above his head. Longclaw's tribe hid the Emerald here who knows how many years ago, but the real question was "Which way?" From the opening, Sonic could tell there were many paths. But he couldn't assume that all of them would take him to the Master Emerald.

"Okay, trial and error . . . ," Sonic said, and sprinted down a first path. It immediately collapsed beneath him, and Sonic hopped back just in time to avoid a pit of spikes! "That was an error."

He'd be more cautious on take two, feeling his way down another path. That is, he thought he could go easy, until his foot set off a pressure plate that launched a volley of arrows right at his head!

"Zero for two. Rough start," Sonic said after ducking out of danger. "I don't have time for this!"

If caution wouldn't yield results, Sonic had to do what he did best: rush in as fast as possible and try not to get killed. He was the fastest thing alive, after all. Why should some labyrinth of booby traps trip him up?

What followed was a flurry of action as Sonic made a speed run at every tunnel available. Some ramps collapsed halfway through his run, and Sonic had to spin jump to safety. Deep in the bowels of one path, he

narrowly avoided a spiked wrecking ball. Down at the lowest levels, the stonework of the labyrinth fell sharply into rivers of flowing lava. Sonic could ride them for a while until the blocks were eaten up by the hot magma. But even after all that, he still hadn't found the Emerald.

Then, at last, he broke through. Swinging on a tangled seaweed vine over the worst of the booby traps, Sonic kicked his way through a crumbling wall and into a central chamber. The green glow of the Emerald and its beacon radiated in the room's center.

"Nailed it." Sonic laughed to himself, but he soon realized he was not alone. Across the chamber, Knuckles and Robotnik stood side by side. Apparently, they'd just made it through themselves.

"Isn't there always someone trying to ruin a bad thing?" Robotnik cried out.

"Oh, you guys are here, too?" Sonic said, squaring off against Knuckles as the Master Emerald shimmered just beyond the reach of them all. "You must've taken the long way, huh?"

"Enough!" Knuckles hollered in rage. "How many times must I destroy you in one day?"

"I don't die so easily, Knucklehead!" Sonic laughed, but behind him, he felt a familiar rumble from his speed run through the labyrinth's many zones.

Sha-Booooom!

A giant spiked wrecking ball burst through the wall behind them, demolishing the support pillars of the room. "Oh, I was wondering where that went," Sonic said with a smile before leaping out of its path.

"Is everything a big joke to you?" Knuckles growled. "Why do you constantly insist on interfering with my destiny?"

"I don't believe in destiny. But I do believe in my friends. And my family. And more importantly . . . they believe in me," said Sonic.

Robotnik blanched. "I think I just threw up in my mouth."

The wrecking ball ricocheted off the columns of the chamber, breaking stone to rubble as it went. The room shook violently, and Sonic made a dash toward the Emerald, leaping from fallen stone to fallen stone. But just as he

was within reaching distance of the prize, *Wham*! Knuckles charged into him with full force and launched Sonic across the room.

“Boy, you two really want to hurt each other,” Robotnik called. “Are you sure you’re not related?”

Now it was Knuckles’ turn to go for the Master Emerald. He rushed forward fists-first like an ape charging through the jungle. Sonic whipped himself into a spin attack and cut the echidna off midway, blasting both combatants back to opposite sides of the chamber.

The hedgehog steadied himself, while across the cavern, Knuckles dug his fists into the ground, equally ready for a bull rush. The Emerald would have to wait until these two settled the score.

“You’ve interfered with my destiny for the last time, hedgehog!” Knuckles yelled.

“Aw, really?” Sonic said cheerfully. “That’s too bad. I was enjoying kicking your butt.”

Sonic dove into the space above, his chaotic speed energy rippling off him in electric blue waves. When Knuckles leaped up to meet him, an angry wave of red energy followed in his wake. The two met in a colorful clash of muscle and magic. The temple began to collapse around them from their battle, but they were too focused—and too evenly matched—to notice or care.

“Why don’t you stand still and die with honor?” Knuckles howled.

“Another idea: How about I run around a lot, and you don’t kill me?”

Amid the madness, a sneaking presence crept ever closer to the Emerald. Robotnik didn’t have his army of drones on him now, but that didn’t make him any less dangerous. “Hey there, beautiful,” he said, approaching the gem. “You’re the real deal, aren’t you?”

“Knuckles, stop!” cried Sonic, seeing the danger too late. “Robotnik is stealing the Emerald!”

“What kind of fool do you take me for?”

“JUST LOOK!!!”

The echidna turned just in time to see his worst fears realized. An unworthy villain had latched onto the Master Emerald, screaming “Mine!” And with that single touch, the powers of all the seven legendary Chaos

Emeralds of old were reborn in him. The Master Emerald embedded itself in Robotnik's chest, merging with the madman.

"Wait!" called Knuckles. "That wasn't the deal. I trusted you. You were my friend!"

"Oh, you poor naive creature." Robotnik laughed as green energy pulsated all over his body. "A more advanced intellect would have seen this move coming. And anyway, I told you no matter who you think your new friend is . . . friendship as a construct is still pathetic!"

"Dishonor!" Knuckles screamed in rage.

Now fully transforming into a glowing, giddy being of pure chaos, Robotnik lifted an arm and shot a force blast high through the ceiling. He flew skyward—no drones needed—and rippled with green energy that could remake the world. As his creepy laughter rang through the chamber, the columns began to collapse around Sonic and Knuckles.

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CHAPTER 15

Sonic had no other choice. The stonework of the chamber was falling like rain now, and if he didn't want his face to be smashed to pieces, he'd have to go down. All the way into the water below. Sonic splashed hard at the edge of the black waves, looking for a way out.

Amid the falling debris, Sonic noticed the echidna had been pinned down by a massive stone column. He struggled to pull his leg free but couldn't make the column budge.

"He betrayed me," Knuckles grunted as Sonic ran up.

"Of course. He's Ro-Butt-Nik. That's what he does!" Sonic threw his arms up in the air. "And now he has the Emerald. I hope you're happy."

"Why would I be happy? This is a horrible outcome!"

The falling stones settled, but it was far from the end of their troubles. Without the Master Emerald in place, the labyrinth had no other option but to sink back into the ocean. As it sank, the chamber began to flood—bubbling water rising in every nook and cranny. Sonic started to speed around the perimeter, looking for a way out. Across the chamber, one hole opened up to the sky and safety. He could run out now, but even after all that had happened, he couldn't just leave Knuckles behind. "Let's get out of here!" he called.

Knuckles tried in vain to bench-press the column, but he finally dropped his arms, out of breath.

"What are you doing?!" Sonic said, kicking at the column in panic.

"I spent my whole life training for this. And I failed."

CRUSH! Another stone block fell on top of the column, double pinning the echidna down. Knuckles smiled weakly. “A fitting end for a failure.”

“You’re not a failure,” Sonic said. “You’re a fighter. So fight!”

“Let me die in peace, pest.”

The murky liquid rose over the echidna’s head. A few last bubbles floated to its surface as Sonic screamed, “Knuckles!!!” Sonic sucked in the biggest breath he could possibly hold and dove deep into the black water.

Sonic tried to push the stone—too heavy! About to lose his breath, he noticed a series of large bubbles pushing up through the cracks in the chamber floor. Sonic took a drastic move and pushed his face into a bubble—and it worked!

He went back to his adversary a second time, pleading with Knuckles, who finally relented. The echidna put his hands on the column, and they pushed together.

The force of both warriors together was enough to give an inch of room, and Knuckles wriggled free. He immediately pulled his arms up in a forceful paddling motion and began to rise to the surface. But Sonic still didn’t know how to swim. Faltering in the water, he sank and saw the red warrior floating farther and farther away from him. In the end, Sonic felt that he was all alone . . . sinking to the bottom of the sea.

But before the darkness settled in, a massive, knuckled white glove reached down and grabbed Sonic by the arm. It pulled him up, out, and to the water’s surface.

The sky was dark, and a sliver of moon lit the night. Around them, the space that had once been a massive whirlpool was now just dark, choppy water, and the craggy island temple that housed the labyrinth was once again fully submerged except for the simple stone peak that barely stood above the water’s surface. A piece of rotted driftwood rose up from the depths, and they grabbed on for dear life.

“Why did you save me?” Knuckles asked as he continued to swim toward the island’s tip. “I’ve been trying to destroy you since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“Because . . . I don’t know. I couldn’t just let you die.”

“Why? You wish to destroy me, too.”

“Uh . . . what are you talking about?”

“You were raised by the murderous owls. From the day I was born, I was told they were savages—Barbarians!—and that the fate of the world depended on stopping them and protecting the Emerald. Then the day came to fight them, but my father stopped me from joining the battle. He said my time to honor our tribe would come . . . but I was only a child.”

“You were trying to grow up too fast . . .” Sonic shook his head.

“Those were the last words he said to me. I never saw him again because your people are killers!”

“Ahhh!” Sonic found himself slipping off the wood.

“But you’re not . . . are you?” Knuckles slowly realized how wrong he’d had it. It took him long enough!

“The only place I kill it is on the dance floor.” Sonic laughed.

But Knuckles was in no laughing mood. “My whole life has been a lie.”

“I don’t think so. Your whole life, you’ve been training to do the right thing . . . you just didn’t know exactly what that was. You thought we were enemies, but we’re in the same boat.”

“My punches must have damaged your brain.” Knuckles chuckled at last. “We are not in a boat.”

“I’m saying we both want to protect the Emerald,” Sonic explaind. “And I think, if we work together, we can do it.”

“Stop talking.” The echidna shook him off.

“I’m serious. A wise old man with a breakfast-pastry obsession once told me that everyone needs help—that the way to be a hero is to find your team of people like you who can—”

“Hedgehog, be silent for once in your life! I hear something . . .”

Sonic stopped and heard it, too. It was an engine—an old-timey biplane buzzing along in the distance. And it was headed right for them.

“That sly little fox,” Sonic said to himself.

Tails, decked out in aviator goggles and a flowing scarf, waved a hand as he circled close to where they were. Off the back of the plane, a banner from the ruined wedding reception dropped and allowed them to climb aboard. Now all they had to do was chase down the most dangerous man in the universe.

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CHAPTER 16

“Chaos IS POWER!!!!”

Robotnik’s words echoed off the clouds in the sky like a prophecy coming true. He could see it all so clearly now. With the power of the Master Emerald absorbed into his body, he no longer needed satellites or drones or bootlickers to control the world around him. He could reach out and touch the world in a way no living being ever had.

The universe itself was a brain. His brain. His big, giant, pulsating brain.

Coasting over the Pacific Ocean, Robotnik hit the western United States with a vengeance. As he pushed his energized form past the dopey little mud huts mankind called civilization, the doctor called every bit of tech to him. Even the smallest circuits and spark plugs were his to command now.

And he knew just where to start.

»»»»»»»

Crouching low in the bushes near the café was the chief mouth breather of all creation, Deputy Sheriff Wade. The moron stammered as he called his big boss man hero for help.

“Tom! It’s Robotnik! He’s back!”

“Yeah, I know that already,” Tom said from a plane still miles away.

“Oh. I wish you’d told me,” said Wade with a shrug. “I guess you know he’s got a secret lair inside the Mean Bean, too.”

“He what?!?!” Tom shouted. “Wade, don’t move, okay? I’ll be there as soon as I can. Do NOT go in there!”

“What? You want me to go in there!” Wade misheard not because of high dropped call rates in Montana but because Robotnik created interference. Like a darling DJ, he skipped and scratched the audio track of Wachowski’s call to dupe the dunderhead into danger.

“Wade, d . . . go in there! Do you hear me? Do *kshhh!* go in there!” Tom’s voice garbled its way into the deputy’s ear.

“All right . . . Sheriff for the weekend, going in!” Wade responded, and ran into the Mean Bean, weapon drawn. If Robotnik was lucky, either he or Stone would dispatch the other. A terrific cosmic joke on the pair of them.

But swatting at flies brought him no great pleasure. If Robotnik were to claim ultimate triumph, he’d need to smash the lawman even worse than he’d done to that drowning blue hedgehog miles behind him. And so Robotnik zeroed his chaotic master mind on Tom’s whereabouts, keeping one step ahead of the do-gooders.

“Do you believe me now?” Tom asked the commander of the high-speed plane they currently occupied.

“This is Commander Walters . . . Scramble every available piece of hardware to Green Hills, Montana, immediately!” the G.U.N. overlord ordered. “We’ve got a Code Mustache. I repeat: CODE MUSTACHE!”

Let them try and come for him. Robotnik was not simply a man anymore. He was all men just as he was no men, and therefore he was . . . a god. It felt like a chorus of dancing girls were continually backing him up as he kicked off the shackles of mortality. It was funky.

In the mostly insignificant instants between when Robotnik spied on his enemies and when he arrived in Green Hills, the sheriff’s idiot partner had managed to hog-tie Agent Stone to a chair. But as Robotnik touched down in the parking lot of the secret base, he knew they’d soon be feeding his massive ego or be crushed by it . . . as was intended.

“Doctor!” cried Stone like an infant as Robotnik glided to the ground, still surging with power. “Sir, are . . . are you feeling okay?”

“OKAY??” Robotnik swiveled his head unit to the right exactly forty-five degrees and beheld his inferior. “I am more than okay,” he declared in

glee. “I have upgraded. I’ve taken my game to the next level. It’s a hybrid of chess and quantum leapfrog. Wanna play?”

In a flash, Robotnik converted his body into energy and then reconstituted himself behind Stone like a bit of binary code flickering one to zero and back again. Teleportation was just a parlor trick to him now.

“Check!” he called out as he undid Stone’s handcuffs without touching them.

“I can smell the electricity in your brain . . . a fine, robust meal for my new form,” he said to his underling before turning to his idiot adversary. “You smell like a snack plate.”

“Kinda my mom’s specialty,” Wade stammered.

“Sir,” Stone called from the view screen. “We’ve got a problem.”

“Incorrect, my trusty sycophant,” Robotnik droned. “After all these years, what I’ve finally got is a solution.”

The mad genius raised the shutters of the café’s windows and revealed a sight Stone cowered from: an assembled battalion of commandos from G.U.N.

They were head to toe in bulletproof armor, packing the most technologically advanced blasters this side of a sci-fi movie. And they were backed by a fleet of tanks, choppers, and cannons. In other words, they were easy pickings for the power of the Master Emerald.

Robotnik blew through the window and into the street. The soldiers were shaking in their boots, he could tell. But they weren’t the ones he wanted to dismantle first. And if calculations were correct (as they of course were), then the object of his ire would just be arriving at the back of the battlements—flown direct from Hawaii in an out-of-date stealth jet.

“Wade?!” called Tom, arriving on the scene.

“Well, well, well . . . if it isn’t the Pastry King,” the doctor taunted.

“It’s Donut Lord,” Tom snapped back. “A real genius would remember the name of the guy who helped kick your scrawny butt off this planet. And I’ll do it again if you mess with Green Hills.” His tender-hearted paramour stepped out from behind him and with . . . a face from the doctor’s past.

“You’re finished, Robotnik,” barked G.U.N. Commander Walter. “We’ve taken everything. Your lab. Your drones. Your funding. Let’s see

how big of a man you are without your silly little robots."

"You want to see how *big* of a man I can be?" Robotnik laughed. He had them exactly where he wanted them.

Reaching out his fingertips and shooting energy into the air, Robotnik handily dismantled a G.U.N. tank. The soldiers inside fell through the air as its pieces swirled around Robotnik like perfectly balanced electrons orbiting an atom's nucleus.

"My god . . ." Walters gawked from below.

"Correct!" Robotnik cheered. "I AM your god!"

"Open fire! Light him up!" the commander called.

But it was too late. The soldiers' guns came apart in their hands, their metal components floating into the sphere around Robotnik.

The sphere grew larger and more impressive. The little people below were horrified to see what he was becoming. An egg-like cranium. Arms of steel. Bone-crunching boots. And a body of pure robotic might. The Master Emerald let Robotnik be anything and everything, and what he wanted to be most in the world was an all-domineering Giant Eggman Robot.

"Stone!" the doctor called to his henchman through the electronic ether. "If you want a chance of living through my impending re-creation of all existence, I demand you load up my World Domination playlist into my mech's earpiece this instant! I'm vibing!"

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CHAPTER 17

Over the ocean, the horizon seemed to go on forever with no land in sight, but Tails had faith they'd make it back in time to stop Robotnik. Normally, their flight would have taken eight hours in an average human transport. But it was cut to barely under two, thanks to Tails' latest innovation. He'd combined his magnetic thruster technology with the light body of an old Earth biplane and come up with . . . the Tornado.

Now the red plane crested over the continental United States with Sonic and Knuckles riding along. They were perhaps the only passengers who could withstand the gale-force winds that whipped across the low-flying aircraft as it shot toward Green Hills.

They were in the final leg now as Tails' guidance system pointed them toward Montana and into the shadow of an ominous storm cloud crackling with green lightning.

"The fearsome power of the Emerald," Knuckles said.

Tails whispered as best he could in his hero's direction. "Are you sure it was a bright idea bringing . . ." He jerked his head slightly in Knuckles' direction. "You-Know-Who aboard for this?"

"Knuckles isn't really a bad guy . . . He's just a little confused," Sonic reassured him.

"I am *not* confused!" Knuckles shouted over the sound of the wind. "I have steely focus."

Still cutting through the atmosphere at maximum velocity, Tails pulled up over the rolling country and into the heart of the town of Green Hills.

None of them were prepared for what they saw.

Towering high above the buildings was a massive Robotnik. This mustache-twirling Giant Eggman Robot stomped through downtown, bursting buildings into flames as it went.

It was a revolting sight to see its steel skin shiver and morph into a stronger exterior with each new bit of technology that Robotnik pulled into his form.

Tails jerked the stick of the Tornado off to the side so he could make a wide sweep around the Giant Eggman Robot, looking for any weak spots. It seemed impossible.

Sonic took charge. “We need a plan. Knuckles, why don’t you . . .”

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” The echidna jumped from his seat and flew through the air at their gigantic foe.

“Ugh. This guy is killing me!” Sonic climbed out onto the double wing of the plane and steadied himself for a different kind of assault. “Looks like it’s gonna be just you and me, buddy. You up for it?”

“If I’m going to go out, Sonic . . . I’d want to do it alongside you.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” The hedgehog laughed. “Get us as close as you can. I’m going to try to—Tails, LOOK OUT!”

They’d been spotted, and a barrage of makeshift missiles flew out of the Giant Eggman Robot’s body. With stolen gas tanks fueling them and makeshift metal warheads, these weren’t as destructive as the average Robotnik missile. But Tails still needed to take evasive maneuvers and do barrel rolls to get them through without a scratch.

“That was close!” Sonic called when they were in the clear. But he was laughing. It was a mad, heroic laugh.

“I know, right?” Tails called back, laughing along. He found it infectious. For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged . . . even if the place he belonged was on the verge of a crazy death.

WHOMP!

One last bit of jet-propelled shrapnel shot out from the Giant Eggman Robot and knocked Sonic clear off the wing! Tails turned the plane toward the villain and busted out his ace in the hole: laser cannons powered by the

same tech as his little blaster. He didn’t even know what the plan was now, but he couldn’t let this machine destroy the place that Sonic loved.

Choom-choom-choom-choom-choom!

The cannons rattled off shot after shot directly at the Egg Mech’s head. Maybe he’d gotten lucky!

Krang!

With a wave of its arm, the Giant Eggman Robot sliced straight through the Tornado’s other wing. Tails had to abandon the plane, jumping just in time to see it in a fireball on a hill outside town. Robotnik’s Emerald-amplified monstrosity marched on toward doom and destruction. Tails had brought them all this way. But if Sonic . . . heck, even if Knuckles didn’t make it, then what chance did they have?

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CHAPTER 18

From his position flying through the air, Sonic could see that the solution to the Giant Eggman Robot was the same as his attack on the labyrinth. He'd have to run right at it.

Luckily, the makeshift missile Robotnik had tagged him with was slow enough to straddle like a cowboy at a rodeo. Sonic was currently bringing the crude projectile around right toward the mech's face.

But first, it was time for Knuckles' shot.

"Robotnik! Face me, you coward!" he called from the street below. Sonic had a glimpse of his strange new ally's showdown from on high, and it did not look good. The echidna pulled his fists up in fighting position. And then with the loud shift of metal joints, the Giant Eggman Robot with the madman's brain struck a kung fu pose in response.

"You deceived me!" Knuckles called from the street.

"Deception is my middle name!" called the cold metal tone of Robotnik from the head in the sky above. "Ha! Another lie. My middle name's actually Gerald. Time to FIGHT!"

Impossibly, a fistfight broke out between the one-hundred-foot mech and the four-foot echidna. Knuckles swung a hard, gnarled fist at the machine, making a tiny scratch in the side of the Giant Eggman Robot's arm.

"Aww, how adorable!" cackled Robotnik's voice.

Whump!

With a long swing of his metal boot, the Giant Eggman Robot punted Knuckles' body off the street and several blocks away. He landed in the middle of the Green Hills High football field as a giant puff of dirt burst into the sky.

"And it's goooooood!" cried the robot with both arms straight in the air.

It was now or never. Sonic stood up, stomped to the back of the missile, and shot them both straight at the Egg Mech.

"Return to sender, Ro-Butt-Nik!" he cried, and jumped off at the last moment. Sonic spun into a ball of crackling blue light and skidded to a halt on the street. In a heartbeat—*Sha-Boom!*—the missile struck the bot's left leg and blew it to pieces.

"Yes!" Sonic called as the mech tumbled. "Who wants an omelet? Because I am cracking eggs!"

But with a set of screeching metal tendrils, the leg reattached itself before the body even hit the dirt. Sonic hadn't stopped the doctor. He'd barely slowed him down. The Master Emerald really would let Robotnik do anything. So what could one kid—no matter how fast—do against it?

Once reassembled, the Giant Eggman Robot shot out a wave of drones to terrorize the streets of Green Hills. It was a nightmare.

"Sonic!" called a voice from Main Street. It was Tom. He stood with Maddie, a wall of shocked soldiers, and a dozen of Sonic's friends.

"Tom! We've got to get everyone out of here!" he yelled, coming to his feet.

"We'll get everyone to safety while you finish Robotnik," Maddie said.

"I . . . I don't think I can," Sonic stammered. "He's too powerful. You were right, Tom. I can't do this alone . . ."

"You're not alone, Sonic." Donut Lord smiled.

"He's with us!" called two voices from down a dark alley. And Tails and Knuckles stepped into the light.

"I knew you'd be back," Sonic said with pride.

"I know, right?" Tails smiled.

"Ready to go for round two?" the hedgehog asked his newest ally.

Knuckles stroked his chin. "I barely felt the last one."

Tom stood up on the back of a truck and called out to those gathered in Green Hills. “You heard Sonic, everyone. We gotta clear the area!”

“Don’t worry, guys!” Sonic called to the townspeople and agents alike. “We’ve got an airtight plan!” He spun and sped his two friends into an alley, panicked. “I lied. I got nothing. Tails, any ideas?”

“If only he had a weak spot.” Tails slapped a fist into his palm.

“I suggest the groin,” said Knuckles.

“No. What?! No.” Sonic stared down the echidna.

“Traditionally, yes, the groin is—”

“Stop saying ‘groin’!” He spied out on the street and saw the Giant Eggman Robot scanning for them.

“Hedgehoooog? Where are you?” sang the empty sound of Robotnik’s voice. “Show yourself and meet your doooOOOOoom!”

“I know what his weak spot is,” Sonic realized. *“Me.”*

“Come again now?” asked Tails.

“I’m the groin!” Sonic laughed. “Why did Robotnik come back to Green Hills? He’s trying to hurt my friends. He wants to destroy my home. I live rent-free in this dude’s head! So if I go out there and rile him up . . .”

Knuckles smiled in realization. “Then he’ll focus his attack on only you. And that leaves him open for a flanking maneuver from me and the fox.”

“Are you sure about this, Sonic?” said Tails, checking one of his endless supply of gizmos. “It’s gonna be dangerous.”

“With this squad? It’s a piece of cake.” Sonic leaned into a stretch before his most crucial run ever. “What I need you to do is back me up the same way you did in the dance-off. You get me?” The fox nodded eagerly.

“Hedgehog, you are a noble and brave warrior,” said Knuckles. “Go to your certain death with honor.”

“We’re gonna have to work on your pep talks, pal,” Sonic said, and set his hands on the ground in a sprinter’s stance. “Now let’s go!” And with a flick of his feet, he was speeding toward the heart of the town.

“Oh, Eggmaaaaaaaan!” Sonic called as he turned into a bright blue blur one more time and tore a path through the Giant Eggman Robot’s legs. But this time, he wasn’t alone. To his right, a bright red firecracker of energy

tore chunks out of the street as it charged. Over his left shoulder, an orange spark flicked in and out of the air, bursting Robotnik's remaining drones as it went. Knuckles and Tails would keep up their end of the plan. Now Sonic had to do his.

"All right, Mustache! You want me? Come and get me!" Sonic shouted, and beat a path out of town.

"I'm going to squash you like a bug!" Robotnik cried through the mech's mouth.

The Giant Eggman Robot shifted and stomped after him. Sonic had the Eggman right where he wanted him!

"Oh, you're so close!" the hedgehog taunted over his shoulder. "Maybe you need a few days to practice your bug squashing and then come back?"

The Giant Eggman Robot tore into the forest hills outside town. Sonic stopped high up a hill. "What's your big plan here, Eggman?" he called. "You gonna build a big robot house? Get yourself a big robot wife?"

"I'm going to enslave humanity!" Robotnik's voice was beyond insanity now. "And what are *they* going to do about it? I'll tell you! They'll do exactly as they're told!"

The mech finally zeroed in on Sonic's location, and Robotnik turned over his last surprise card. Laser eyes! The green energy of the Master Emerald poured out of the Giant Eggman Robot's visor.

The ray sliced through the trees, and on the ground, Sonic appeared to be down and out, splayed out on his back, barely breathing.

"Giving up already? Why don't you get up, you pathetic little wretch!" the Giant Eggman Robot called as it stomped toward the broken hedgehog. "Did you not realize you can't beat me? I'm all-powerful . . . all-knowing . . . all-seeing!"

And with a final step of his monster boot, Robotnik came down on Sonic's body with a crushing blow.

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CHAPTER 19

Tails struggled to keep Knuckles aloft as they flew out of Green Hills and into the forest lands where the Giant Eggman Robot chased after Sonic. It didn't help that he was holding the bulky echidna by one hand, but he needed the other free in order to work his device.

"Faster, fox! We're losing them!" Knuckles shouted.

"Yeah, but you're really . . . heavy . . ." He strained and hit a few more keystrokes on his data pad. "Still, we're almost there!"

They zoomed up behind the giant robot and made their ascent to the top of the mech's head while Sonic insulted and outmaneuvered the giant into the tree cover below. Tails fiddled with the knobs on his device.

They got into place. Robotnik's screeching voice reached a crescendo as he cried out, "Did you not realize you can't beat me? I'm all-powerful . . . all-knowing . . . all-seeing!"

Tails couldn't help but close his eyes at the upsetting sight of Robotnik's boot pinning his hero down, but he couldn't stop. The time to act was now!

"Hey, Robotnik!" Knuckles shouted, and punched the Giant Eggman Robot upside its head as hard as he could. The doctor's moment of triumph was delayed as he reached for the pair of interlopers, but Tails led the jump off the robot and into the air.

As they fell, Robotnik swiped around him like a child swatting flies. He brought his big hands together on the red form of his former companion and laughed at the thunderous boom it created.

“Don’t mess with me, man! I have a PhD!!” the doctor cheered, only to open his tree-crushing hands and find . . . nothing.

“Missed me!” Knuckles called, running up a metal arm.

“And me, too!” Tails spun through the air in front of the mech’s face.

“Now that you mention it,” called the voice of Sonic . . . and at that instant, Robotnik flew into an uncontrollable rage.

And it wasn’t just those three now. A squadron of Tails buzzed around the robot’s head. Half a dozen Knuckles swarmed its legs. And worst of all for Robotnik, a fleet of Sonics zigzagged around the hills ahead, making electric blue crisscrosses as they went. The robot lifted its foot and found no body underneath.

“I! HATE! THAT! HEDGEHOG!” the doctor screamed.

“Maybe you just hate holograms.” Knuckles laughed from above the mech’s chest plate. “Most of us are them, after all. See? I can lie, too!”

Tails’ tech had worked flawlessly. The multiple projections of the trio that he’d programmed on the flight over kept popping up from the device he’d planted on the mech’s shoulder—distracting the enraged scientist while Knuckles—the real one—slammed a fist deep into the villain’s steel chest cavity and crawled his way into the cockpit. When he finally tore his way into the same space as Robotnik, the echidna didn’t hesitate to hit the distracted doctor as hard as he could.

Whomp!

Tails watched as the punch reverberated with waves of green chaos energy.

“The Emerald!” the doctor screamed as he realized the punch had removed the Master Emerald from his body. “No! No! No! No!”

Without the Emerald powering him or his suit, the Giant Eggman Robot started going limp. “Computer! Auxiliary power . . . now!”

The Giant Eggman Robot replied to the command. Even if it was powered by the Emerald, it was designed by Robotnik and would still obey. The mech jerked back to life, tossing Knuckles aside and digging on the ground for its lost power source.

That’s when Tails spotted Sonic. He really had taken a hit for the team. He had been crushed by the Giant Eggman Robot’s boot, but he survived

and was now crawling toward the shining prize they'd all fought so hard to capture.

"Look out, Sonic!" called a familiar voice. Coming up the road in a pickup were Tom and Maddie, as they tore the vehicle off road.

"Look at the happy little family!" Robotnik sneered, his overconfidence back in full effect. "All the people I hate most in the world in one convenient, smashable place!" The Giant Eggman Robot thrust a fist into the ground, directly between Sonic, the Wachowskis, and the Emerald itself.

KROOOOOOM!

The ground shook with the force of the blow, but Sonic rose back up and made a beeline for the Emerald. He put his hands on it at last!

But when he opened his hands to inspect the prize, the Emerald shattered into pieces. Its power seemed to go dead.

"What am I supposed to even do with this thing?" Sonic called out.

Robotnik used his mech to set fire to trees in a wide circle around the hedgehog. Tails couldn't reach him. Neither could Knuckles or Tom and Maddie. And he didn't want them to.

"Stand back!" Sonic choked on the smoke as the Emerald fragments fell about his feet. "It's me that he wants!"

Maddie ran through the fire, followed by Tom. "Sonic, we're not going anywhere," they said. "We're your family." The three of them embraced. The Emerald sparkled beneath them just as Robotnik brought down his foot for a final, potentially fatal blow.

WHAM!

Tails watched the only three people on this or any planet who had ever welcomed him get snuffed out just like that. "Noooooooo!" he cried.

"I got him! I finally got him! I always knew I could do it!" Robotnik cheered as he ground his foot deeper into the ground.

Suddenly, light shone out from beneath the Egg Mech's foot, brighter and purer than the Master Emerald's beacon. Tails had to shield his eyes from its powerful golden glow as something lifted the leg of the mech off the ground. With a final push, the foot was cast aside, and everyone could see . . . Sonic?

His fur had transformed into a glowing, golden hue. His quills were longer and pulsated with energy. And as this Sonic rose into the air, Tails could see Tom and Maddie safely behind him, unharmed, staring at him in awe. Tails knew this was something the universe had never seen before. This wasn't just Sonic anymore. This was Super Sonic.

"It's over, Eggman . . . ," Super Sonic called with a voice that shook the trees.

"I like the new look!" Robotnik's voice trembled with fear. "It works for you! Say, let's let bygones be bygones, huh? I did some things. You did some things. Who can even remember how this fight started?!"And then the mad doctor screamed. "At least I can tell you how it ends!" he yelled, and threw a last desperate punch from the Giant Eggman Robot at Super Sonic. The hedgehog flew through the air to dodge the punch. Eggman tried again and again to land a blow, but Super Sonic was like a beam of light shooting across the night sky.

In a flurry of flying blows, Super Sonic wrapped the mech in a web of laser-hot chaos energy. The bot never had a chance. With each new thundering blast, more of its shell fell apart, collapsing finally into a pile of jagged metal rubble. And somewhere within, the weak voice of the all-too-human Robotnik croaked, "I'll . . . get you . . . hedgehog!" But he was down for the count.

Super Sonic landed next to Maddie and Tom. Tails landed next to Knuckles, who kept a fearful distance from their friend.

"Wait! Do not touch him!" Knuckles called, stopping Tom dead in his tracks. "The hedgehog now holds the power of the Emerald within him. It's too much for any one creature to handle. I'm sorry . . . but he's just not the Sonic you once knew."

Super Sonic floated eerily for a moment, then placed one gloved hand under his armpit.

Braaaaaaaap!

The fart sound hit with the decibels of a bomb blast, and Super Sonic came down laughing hysterically.

"Okay," Knuckles admitted. "He's exactly the Sonic you once knew."

The glowing hedgehog reached his hands into the fur of his chest, and he started to glow as bright as ever before. Sonic lifted his hands to the sky in a blast, the seven Chaos Emeralds shooting from his body. Moving at an ungodly speed, they blasted through space and time itself. Gone forever. And as he floated to the ground, Sonic returned to his natural color.

"Whew!" He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Good to be back in blue. The golden god thing was fun, but this has always been more my color."

"Sonic!" Maddie cried as she and Tom rushed to him for a hug.

"Sonic," Tails said in astonishment. "You were the most powerful hero in the universe just now. Why'd you give it up?"

His hero smiled. "Because I'm not done being a kid yet."

On the edge of the field, Knuckles bent down and looked at the fragments of the initial Master Emerald that lay in the dirt—dark and powerless.

"I've spent my whole life questing for this," he said. "Now I have it, and it's worthless."

"You got it all wrong, man," Sonic said, kneeling beside him. "Don't you get it? Centuries ago, our two people went to war with each other over seven Chaos Emeralds. And in their fighting, they brought those Emeralds together to try and hold ultimate power. But it just drove them further apart. I didn't earn the power of the Chaos Emeralds because I was worthier or more powerful than you. I got it because you and I worked together."

Sonic gathered the fragments of the shattered Emerald and squeezed them together in his hands. "Now the seven have returned, and I'll make sure that their chaos is under control from here on out. But you have a mission, too, Knuckles. Take this . . ." With a squeezing of his fists, the green light shone brightly, and a new Master Emerald was forged. "Because if the forces of the Chaos Emeralds ever get out of control again, we'll need you to use this and restore balance."

Tails beamed at what he was seeing. "This is just like the legends of old!" he said. "There were once two orders of heroes who protected the galaxy from those who would use the Emeralds for evil . . ."

"But they have all passed to the great battleground in the sky," Knuckles agreed.

“So we start a new order,” Sonic said, holding his fist out in the air. “The three of us.”

Tails bumped his fist instantaneously. But Knuckles held back, cautious.

“This is no light task we undertake,” the echidna said. “To use our powers to keep the universe safe. To watch out for one another—our new tribe.” Finally, he threw his fist in.

“It’s called a power bump.” Tails smiled. “An Earth custom. An unbreakable promise.”

Sonic grinned. “Way past cool,” he said.

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CHAPTER 20

Things were moving slower than ever before, and Sonic loved it.

The summer days in Green Hills seemed to stretch out forever, and as the townsfolk assembled for an exhibition game at the baseball field, everyone was content to let the innings roll on and on.

Sonic leaned lazily on an elbow in the announcer's box, Ozzy at his feet, as he called the play on the field with a nice, comfortable drawl. "It's a beautiful day for baseball here in Green Hills, folks," he said. "And an exciting lineup, too, with the debut of two new players to your hometown roster."

On the field, Donut Lord and Maddie were spread out between left center and right center, hopefully far back enough to catch any of the bat-breaking hits that were sure to be coming. But that was only if the pitcher didn't deliver a perfect game.

"On the mound is the rookie sensation Miles 'Tails' Prower!" Sonic called as his wingman wound up. "He's a real ace, folks, but look out for who he's facing."

At home plate, Knuckles held a bat over his shoulder with a puzzled look on his face. "I don't understand," the gruff echidna said. "What has this spherical object done to deserve such an attack?"

"It's not an attack!" Sonic called across the field, his hand covering the announcer's mic. "You just want to hit it as hard as you can and then run around the bases!"

"If my goal is to arrive where I am standing, why run at all?"

Tails laughed. “It’s a game, man! Try and have a little fun.”

“Fun!” Knuckles grunted and lifted the bat into his stance. “Huh.”

Tails let fly a solid fastball, but before it was halfway to the plate, Sonic had sped his way into the catcher’s position and held his mitt out in case Knuckles whiffed.

Swap!

The pitch landed in Sonic’s glove a little too gently for a strike. “Come on, Tails! Give him the heat!” he called, throwing it back.

“Hope you’re ready for my real fastball, Knuckles!”

“I was not ready before, but now I shall dishonor you and your so-called ‘fastball’!”

From the outfield, the adults called them to order. “It’s just a game, guys!” said Maddie as Tom coached. “Remember to keep your elbow up, Knuck! Eye on the ball and just give it a ride!”

“A ride to where?” Knuckles wondered. But he had no time to ponder. The next pitch was thrown. As it sped to the plate, the bat fell to the ground. And then . . .

CRACK!

Knuckles punched the ball straight on, sending it soaring into the air. It rose far over Tom’s and Maddie’s heads, past the scoreboard, and into the parking lot of a restaurant two blocks east.

“I think that was our last ball,” Tom said as they ran in from the field.

“No fair! That shouldn’t count!” cried Tails.

“Victory is mine!” Knuckles shouted, and flexed.

It was a good ending for the game. Later, they’d go for ice cream, then stay up late for a movie. And then tomorrow, they’d do it all again. For once, it was a slow pace Sonic could be happy with, because he had his own crew to share the experience.

“I’m happy for you, pal,” Tom said as they hung back on the walk to the ice-cream parlor. “You’ve finally got your perfect wingmen. These guys are the perfect friends to grow up with.”

Sonic almost blushed. He still wondered, of course. What other threats would be out there? What shadowy figures wanted to upset the life these three were building? How long before they’d be called to action again?

But for the moment, none of that mattered. All that mattered was that he was here in the place he belonged—and with the people he belonged with. “It’s not just the crew that makes me happy,” Sonic said. “It’s everything we’ve got here . . . Dad.”

Donut Lord threw his arm around Sonic, and they walked toward home.

Left alone on the baseball field is a sports cooler with drinks and ice. Resting in the center of the cooler is the Master Emerald. In an instant, Sonic is next to the cooler. “Ooh! Can’t forget this!” And in a blue blur, the cooler disappears.

THE END

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About the Author

Kiel Phegley is the author of several titles for Penguin Young Readers Licenses, including *Sonic the Hedgehog: The Official Movie Novelization*, *Sonic the Hedgehog's Race Against Chaos Sticker Activity Book*, and *Sonic and the Tales of Terror*.

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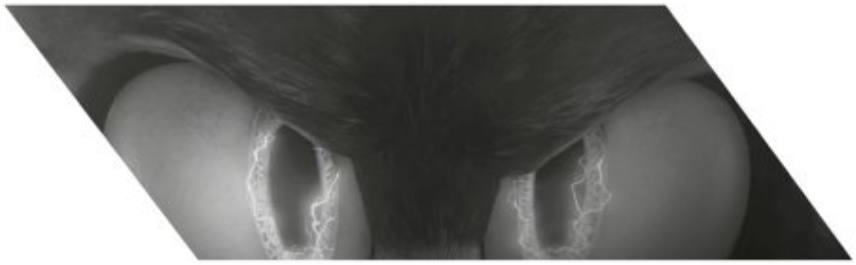

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story by Pat Casey & Josh Miller
screenplay by Pat Casey & Josh Miller
and John Whittington
directed by Jeff Fowler
written by Kiel Phegley

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About the Author

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CHAPTER 1

Sonic the Hedgehog was the fastest creature on planet Earth. He was easily the fastest creature in the galaxy. And the known universe? Sure, it was incomprehensibly big. But if he had to bet on it, Sonic would wager that he was the fastest thing alive anywhere.

So, he was definitely the fastest thing at the Wachowski family campsite. And he was going to prove it. Because the fact was, he didn't lose.

"I love the smell of victory in the morning," Sonic said, lazily biting into his favorite snack fresh from the grill. "And chili dogs. Yup. Victory and chili dogs…my two favorite smells."

Beside him, his two best pals bristled with anxiety. The inventive fox Tails and the rough warrior Knuckles the Echidna stretched their legs and eyed the trails down the mountain that overlooked their home of Green Hills, Montana.

"By the way, are you sure you guys want to race me? I'm the fastest creature in the universe. It's kind of my whole brand," joked Sonic, tilting his head behind him to crack his back.

"We'll see about that," called Tails with a smirk.

"It is my destiny to claim the throne of family champion," Knuckles growled and beat one of his huge fists into the ground.

"Once again, not an official title, but I respect the confidence, buddy." Sonic laughed.

Ahead of the trio, Sonic's parents Tom and Maddie Wachowski straddled either side of the official race starting line. "Don't worry," Tom, affectionately known as Donut Lord, said to his wife. "A little sibling rivalry is healthy. Me and my brothers used to do this kind of thing all the time."

“Tom, your brothers are lunatics.” Maddie raised an eyebrow. “And neither was born with the power to trigger a global cataclysmic event.”

“Fair point,” Tom said. “Hear that, boys? No cataclysmic events! You got me?”

“10-4! You got it! Understood, Lord of the Donuts!” the boys called back.

Maddie raised an arm and called out, “On your mark, get set, g—”

As soon as the sound waves of Maddie’s *o* split the air, Sonic took off in the blink of an eye. Sonic was already tearing a path through the woods while the shockwaves from his speeding quills shredded the vegetation all around them. It was almost too easy.

Sonic called behind him in his most official sports announcer tone. “And way out in front—to the surprise of absolutely no one—it’s the Blue Blur, the Red-Shoed Rocket, the one and only…”

“C’mon, Sonic! Catch up!” called a familiar voice from the sky. With a buzzing whip of his helicopter hind end, Tails shot out ahead.

“What the what?!?” Sonic shouted. Could the fox be using his latest technological creation to boost his speed? That would be cheating!

“I am also defeating you, hedgehog!” crowed the gruff voice of the electric red echidna as Knuckles burst into view out in front. How could he even do that? The guy’s hands alone added twenty pounds on his frame!

“Seriously?” Sonic called after the pair. “All right…time to light the afterburners!”

Digging his toes deeper into the dirt, Sonic shot down the rocky terrain of the forest like an F-15 jet. “Look!” he cried. “It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s…Air Hedgehog!” Then with an athletic leap, he executed his signature spin dash and blasted down the mountainside as a ball of quills crackling with electric blue energy. Within seconds, Sonic had slapped the sign that marked the finish, leaving it spinning like a weather vane.

“Yes!” Sonic cheered as he slid into a victory dance. “I did it! I did it! I…lost?!”

Four feet in front of him, Tails and Knuckles stood with triumphant looks on their faces.

“I am also defeating you, hedgehog!” Knuckles bragged again in the same gruff tone.

“Okay, okay, I get it, man,” Sonic said. “No need to rub it in.”

“C’mon, Sonic! Catch up!” Tails repeated, hovering just off the ground.

“Wait a minute. What’s going on?” Sonic walked toward them with an eyebrow raised. “Why are you guys acting like…holograms?” The hedgehog waved a gloved hand through the faces of his best pals, and their intangible images glitched just for a moment. Another one of Tails’ inventions no doubt. “This means I remain the undefeated speed champion of all time, yes! But also—what is going on?”

Whoooooosh!

In half the time it took him to go down the mountain, Sonic raced back up to their campsite and skidded short into the clearing to find his family waiting for him. “Surprise!” they called out in unison, and Sonic saw that their campsite and tents now included a shimmering set of party streamers and a large cake.

“Wait a minute,” Sonic said. “The race was just a distraction—which I totally didn’t fall for by the way, good try, though—so you guys could throw a party for me?”

“You got it, pal.” Tom smiled from under a party hat. “Today’s the anniversary of the day you came to Earth. It’s your Earth Day Birthday!”

“Or *Bearthday* for short!” said Maddie as she unfurled a “Happy Bearthday!” banner above their picnic table.

“Today, we honor you, hedgehog,” said Knuckles.

“That’s right,” Tom agreed. “The day you came to this planet was the day all our lives changed forever.”

“And our family became possible.” Maddie stooped down to give him a hug.

Sonic was overwhelmed with warm feelings and, for once in his life, he was *almost* speechless. “Aw, you guys. I don’t know what to say except—LET’S PARTY!”

The gang sat down for a typical Wachowski family barbecue, which of course was not so typical by Earth standards. There were tons of chili for the hot dogs, piles upon piles of green grapes, and way too much birthday cake for any human to consume. But this crew didn’t do anything like humans.

“You know, Sonic,” Tom said, “I didn’t realize it when we booked the spot, but this is a celebration of your Bearthday in more ways than one.”

“Are they going to throw a parade in my honor, too?” Sonic laughed.

“No, but we’re not far from the place where you said you made your stomping grounds before we found you. See any familiar sights?”

“Wait.” The implication dawned on Sonic. “That means…”

Whoooosh!

In a heartbeat, Sonic had soared up the ridge and to a place that had once been his only home on the planet. He drank it in for a long moment. Behind him, Sonic heard the crunch of gravel under boots. It was Tom. “Whoa…Sonic, it’s…”

“My old cave,” he said wistfully. So much of his stuff was still here. The busted Ping-Pong table. The corroded boom box. Even a few less-than-mint-condition *Speed Demon* comics. But they weren’t the most important thing. Sonic tore down the vines that had grown over the wall to reveal his mural. It was sketchy and faded—he did it when he was a kid, after all—but it was all he could remember of his home world. There was a field of stars representing all of galactic civilization (or what he knew of it then), the rough shape of a loop-de-loop where he had honed his speed…and finally two figures standing hand in hand with big toothy smiles beaming out. One was Sonic, and the other one was an owl—Longclaw. Sonic’s mother.

“I drew that when I first got to Earth,” Sonic explained. “To always remember where I came from.” And he had never forgotten. Even after Tom stopped being “Donut Lord” to him and became “Dad.” Even after two earth-shattering battles with the insane Eggman better known as Dr. Robotnik. Even after adventures that spanned the globe and back again. He never stopped thinking about his original home or the mother who helped him escape to Earth.

“I can’t believe this cave is where you lived all those years,” Tom said. “It’s really proof of how much things have changed. How much you’ve grown. How much you’ve lost.”

“I still miss her. Do you think Longclaw would be proud of me?”

“I *know* she would be, pal. Because even though you lost her at such a young age, you made a choice back then—to never let that change who you are inside.” Tom tapped a finger on Sonic’s chest.

“In my lungs?” The hedgehog broke his reverie.

“In your heart.” His dad laughed. “That’s the thing about life, Sonic. It’s all about the choices we make. And as you grow up, you’ll make some good ones, and you’ll probably make a few bad ones along the way.”

“Like that time I ate three dozen chili dogs and caused irreparable damage to the plumbing system?”

“What?” Tom said before Sonic shrugged it off. “Look, what I’m trying to say is as long as you stay true to who you are inside, you’ll make the right choices when it matters most.”

“I will, Dad. I promise.”

Just then, the air above Green Hills swirled with the sound of chopper blades. And they were headed right for the family’s campground.

“Who’s flying a helicopter here?” Sonic said.

Tom looked to the sky. “Military.”

Whoooooooosh!

Sonic zoomed back to the campsite to find a fully armed unit of soldiers staring them down. Each human was dressed in the all-black gear of the Guardian Units of Nations—an international law enforcement organization ridiculously known as G.U.N. that had been tracking Sonic since he made himself known on Earth. And at their lead was a fierce-looking woman with jet-black hair. She was new, and Sonic didn’t like her vibe, to be honest. They stared each other down for a tense moment.

“Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski,” the woman said as Tom joined them. Then with a terse nod to Sonic and his pals, she acknowledged them. “Aliens.”

“Aliens?” Sonic paced around her with a cocked eyebrow. “Rude. We have names!”

“I’m aware,” the woman said. “They’re short, strange, and in some cases directly related to your body parts.” She took off her sunglasses and shot a flat stare at them. “I’m G.U.N. Director Rockwell. I’ve been sent by Commander Walters. There’s a dangerous situation unfolding in Tokyo right now involving a super-powered alien. One much like yourselves. Walters is requesting Team Sonic’s immediate assistance.”

“Team *Sonic*?” Knuckles butted in. “Who picked that name?”

“Love it. Ten out of ten. No notes,” said Sonic. “And wait…there’s *another* alien like us out there?”

“Lucky for Earth, right?” Rockwell said in a deadpan voice. “Follow me. We need to leave. *Right now*.” Sonic looked back to Tom and Maddie, who stepped forward with the rest of the team. But Rockwell blocked their path. “I’m sorry,” she said. “No civilians.”

“Hey!” Sonic shot back. “If they don’t go, none of us do!”

Tom brought Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles in for a family huddle. “Look, buddy, this is your call,” he said. “But for what it’s worth, we think you guys can handle anything thrown at you.” Maddie agreed, and as Sonic looked around the circle, he could tell that his two best friends were as ready for action as ever.

“All right,” Sonic told Rockwell. “We’re in.”

Sonic knew the risks. He’d lost a home once and a parent, too. So, no matter what danger lay ahead, he wouldn’t lose anymore.

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CHAPTER 2

The lights of Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing rose up in every direction. Towering television screens flared on countless skyscrapers, projecting hot pink advertisements into the stormy sky. And on the wet streets, the glare from the red tops of the rapidly approaching police cars was inescapable. The alien life-form in the middle of it all squinted in the searing light. The colors hurt his eyes.

But Shadow the Hedgehog knew that all this flash only covered up a darkness underneath.

"Creature! Stand down and submit to apprehension!" called a stilted voice over a loudspeaker. The police seemed afraid of Shadow. They were right to be.

Slish!

Like a rolling blackout, the dark trail of Shadow's body cut a semicircle in front of the police line. His legs weren't moving as fast as they once did. He missed his roller skates. But he was speedy enough to slosh dirty gutter water over his adversaries and drive them back. Still, his muscles ached as he skidded to a halt.

How long had it been? Months? Years? Decades even?

Once upon a time, Shadow's life had been a happy one. He had been born in a lab and only saw creatures that looked nothing like him. But he had Maria, and she was enough. The young girl showed him the stars and that a world existed outside his lab. She shared the beauty of music and the meaning of fun. But it was not meant to last. Because Shadow's guardians —his captors, really—could not let them live in peace.

"WALTERS!" Shadow screamed into the Tokyo sky. "Show yourself, you coward!"

All around him, the now soggy police shifted uneasily, but Shadow's true nemesis was nowhere in sight. As the hedgehog's anger grew, his power began returning to him as well. He could feel the thrilling shock of unpredictable energy crackle through his muscles and out of his quills.

Yes, he had been hidden underground for years. That much was clear. The traitor Walters and his goons had trapped Shadow in cryo-freeze—keeping him in suspended animation until they found someone else who could steal his power from him. But that was over now. Only twenty-four hours ago, his long nightmare had ended. The glass of Shadow's cage had shattered, and he had made easy work of the guards sent to contain him.

Shadow had been liberated. One man was responsible for the freedom he now possessed, and his ancient, oily voice rang in Shadow's head. "Lovely to see you again…have you missed me?" Shadow had not. But at least he had one man he could place his trust in on his quest for revenge. For now.

"Freeze!"

A second wave of soldiers appeared, surrounding Shibuya Crossing. They creeped and clawed their way out of the corners of this strange city. Did they think they could sneak up on Shadow? It was impossible, but when he heard the roar of engines and saw the dark-clad brutes on their two-wheeled attack vehicles, he knew where they were from. G.U.N. had arrived. The fools.

"Under the authorization of the Guardian Units of Nations, I order you to stand down and submit to arrest!" a masked captain yelled.

"I have no quarrel with you, little man," Shadow snarled in reply. "Bring me your leader or face the consequences."

"Soldiers…on my mark…" The captain raised his hand as the red laser sights of a dozen high-tech weapons zeroed in on Shadow's shimmering black fur.

"Have it your way," Shadow said. Whether Walters was with them or not, his vengeance would begin here.

Vrooooom!

A cycle sped through the clearing and tried to clip Shadow's shoulder… but missed. Soon two more joined, each rider carrying long batons charged with energy. He was only glad to show them what real energy could do.

Swack! He pulled one rider off and swung his limp body overhead. *Crack!* The soldier collided with his compatriot and collapsed in a wet pile of tangled limbs. *Vroooooom!* But the final rider kept his distance. He hoped to trip up Shadow with his long reach, perhaps. A foolish gesture.

Glitch!

In a snap, Shadow had disappeared from the center of the road and rematerialized on the back of the last cycle. He began clubbing its pilot with the man's own baton. Once the bike skidded out, the hedgehog swiftly turned back to the street and saw the fallen rider struggle to his feet. They stood for a moment, face-to-face, before the man cut on a dime and sprinted toward the alley. A smart move.

"Do you see the futile nature of your efforts now?" Shadow called to the nervous remainder of men. "All I ask is for your leader! I hear you call him 'Commander' now! But all he will command in the end is the attention of my fists! I repeat: Where is Walters?!"

Chook!

A bright floodlight shone right where Shadow stood. He could not see, but even in this blistering beam, he was at home. This was how it felt when he was awoken, and he always knew that where there was light, someone hid behind it.

When this new floodlight rolled toward him on thundering black tires, he felt no fear from the G.U.N. heavy assault vehicle. No tank could drive him from his purpose. And it certainly couldn't protect them from his power.

"Chaos…" Shadow raised an arm to the sky and gathered all the energy he could in his chest. "Control!!!" With a steamy crackle in the air, he moved instantaneously from in front of the assault vehicle into the heart of its engine and then back again. No harm would befall Shadow with this move. But as for the vehicle…

KABOOM!

The blaze from the exploding truck sent the G.U.N. crew scattering. That would teach them what they were facing. That would begin to show all these accursed humans what they had tried to hide away in the dark. Yet if Shadow was forced to fight to make them see, there was only one enemy he wanted to lay his hands on.

"Walters!" he cried again in anguish. "Where is Walters?!?"

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CHAPTER 3

Tails adjusted the heavy headphones to fit his pointy ears. The fox checked the dashboard of complicated instruments and then slowly maneuvered the behemoth Chinook helicopter out over the skyline. Human tech was still centuries behind the kind of things the galactic animal civilization that he had grown up in could produce, but boy did Tails find this stuff *fun*.

"Good evening and welcome to Tails Air, Flight 1012," he spoke into the headset mic. "We're looking at an on-time arrival into Tokyo, and for those of you who have adventured with us before, you *will* be earning frequent flyer miles!"

In the bowels of the chopper, Sonic and Knuckles held on amid a group of G.U.N. agents and their newest leader. "This is the lowest moment of my professional career," Rockwell grumbled, her head in her hands.

"Lighten up, lady," Sonic said with his feet propped up and hands behind his head. "You should consider it an honor to lead my personal adventure escort."

Good ol' Sonic, always ready with a joke. Tails looked up to the hedgehog more than it was acceptable to admit. But working with your hero was always payment enough to make him happy. The fox just hoped he could contribute something to the team that no one else could.

Take G.U.N. and their schemes, for example. Sonic and the Wachowskis hadn't even known that the secretive international organization was watching them when he first connected with the people of Green Hills. But since Tails arrived, he'd been building an arsenal of information on the Guardian Units of Nations. He reverse engineered the device they'd left at the family house to better understand their communications systems. He kept every scrap of blaster, badge, or metal that they'd left behind after the

big fight with Dr. Robotnik in Green Hills last year. And at that very moment, he had plugged his Miles Electric Device into their attack helicopter and was using it to download as many secrets as he could from their servers.

“You don’t like us, do you?” Sonic teased Rockwell from the back. Keep going, buddy. Keep her distracted.

“Don’t take it personally,” the woman explained. “I hate all aliens equally. But you specifically, I don’t *trust*. You still refuse to reveal the location of the Master Emerald. And *no one* can be trusted with a weapon that powerful.”

“We completely agree!” Sonic said. “That’s why it’s Knucks’ job to keep it safe and hidden at all times.”

“I swore a sacred oath to protect the Emerald from *anyone* who might abuse its powers.” Knuckles crossed his arms, proud and bold.

“And FYI, he takes his sacred oaths super sacredly,” Tails called back from the pilot’s seat.

“Look, this cuddly ‘Stuffed Animals with Superpowers’ act may work on Walters, but it doesn’t work on me. I think you’re reckless, dangerous, and completely unqualified to be here in the field.”

“But you just met me.” Sonic playfully pouted. “Normally, it takes someone hours to realize I’m not qualified to be here.”

“The idea of G.U.N. agents being ‘qualified’ for battle is laughable,” Knuckles said, bristling. Just months ago, he’d had a run-in with two rogue members of Rockwell’s organization who tried to steal his power for their own nefarious purposes. “Your ranks lack honor, but at the very least, their failure to capture this alien gives us the opportunity to test our mettle.” Knuckles stood up and paced the length of the hold.

“Okay, everybody,” Tails called back. “I think we’re clear enough from town that we can cut this trip short.” In truth, the fox didn’t need the extra airspace to maneuver the helicopter through a golden ring portal. He’d been using them since he was little, and only under rare circumstances did he have trouble opening a portal to where he wanted to go. But now his download of G.U.N. files was complete, and it was time to toss out the ring and make their portal to Tokyo.

Zam!

“Finally! Some action!” Knuckles cheered as the gateway opened in front of them.

“Just in case, you may want to carry a few of these,” Tails said, tossing back a handful of compact metal cubes. Once they landed in the echidna’s massive hands, the cubes unfolded into a pair of superstrong manacles. “Titanium handcuffs,” the fox explained. “Completely indestructible.”

“I don’t need your silly gizmos, fox.” Knuckles tossed the devices aside. “And do you know why? Because…”

“Because you’re one million percent muscle,” both Tails and Sonic said in unison.

“Yes, good. You have been listening.”

“We’re over the drop zone now!” a G.U.N. officer declared as the running lights of the helicopter’s interior flashed from red to green.

“Thanks for the loan,” said Tails, handing the craft’s stick over to the pilot. He’d learned a lot from the experience. More than they’d ever know.

As the chopper swung low over the glittering Tokyo skyline, Team Sonic gathered near the side door, which swung open, letting in a rush of night air. Tails watched as the G.U.N. crew leaned back uneasily, but not even a five-hundred-foot drop would shake Sonic’s nerve. The trio of heroes leaned over the city, and Tails couldn’t help but smile at the thrilling prospect of an all-new adventure.

“Look, we don’t know if it’s Godzilla or Hello Kitty down there,” Sonic said. “But as long as we stick together, there’s nothing we can’t handle.”

“All that leaves is the task of finding this rogue,” Knuckles said.

KABOOM!

“Well then, maybe we should follow the giant fireball?” asked Tails as the glow from an explosion in a central Tokyo crossing flashed across their faces even from this great distance.

“Looks like it’s go time,” Sonic said. “Team Sonic on three?”

Tails checked his gear as he counted, “One! Two! Three!”

“TEAM KNUCKLES!!” the echidna called as he leaped from the helicopter and glided down toward the city in his signature style.

“It’s okay. We’re going to get that one back.” Sonic laughed before his red shoes revved up in an infinity spin and launched his electric blue form into the sky below.

Alone at the edge, Tails looked back at Director Rockwell. “It doesn’t matter if you like him or trust him,” the fox explained. “Sonic is still going to save the day because he’s a hero, and that’s what heroes do. Something you people should consider for yourselves.”

And with that, Tails buzzed off into the air, his twin spinning tails carrying him along faster than the vehicle could ever go. Whoever this new alien was, he was no match for Team Sonic. Tails was sure of it.

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CHAPTER 4

Sonic's shimmering form unrolled as he and his friends slid into the crossing where they'd seen the explosion. What was left on the scene was ugly.

"What happened here?" his angry red ally said in a rare moment of surprise.

"Looks like G.U.N. got their butts kicked," Sonic said. "Keep your eyes open. Tails, anything on your end?"

"Whoa!" the young fox called, hovering behind them with his yellow Miles Electric Device in hand. "These energy readings are off the charts!"

"Look out!"

Sonic leaped toward Tails as a massive military vehicle rolled directly at them. Even at his speed, the thing was bearing down on them until…

Crunch!

"One. Million. Percent. Muscle." Knuckles bragged and flexed amid the ruins of the vehicle he'd just split apart with one punch.

"So I've been told." Sonic laughed, but something didn't feel right. The fastest thing alive shouldn't have been so close to getting squashed like a bug under a boot, right? What was powerful enough to move a piece of machinery that big at that speed?

"Wait," Tails said as the smoke thinned out in the crossing ahead. "Is that…?"

"Another hedgehog!" Knuckles completed the unthinkable thought.

"No way," Sonic said, more to himself than anyone else. "He looks just like me."

They could have been brothers. Whoever this guy was, he was the same size and same build as Sonic. He even had the same keen fashion sense to style up his head quills in a way that said "Yes, I am this cool. Thank you

for noticing.” Yet there was something darker in this character as well. It wasn’t just his black fur or the way he crackled with raging red energy. (Something Sonic totally wasn’t jealous of, okay?) It was that in this hedgehog’s eyes there was a real pain—something beyond anger he was using to smash everything in sight. It was like he’d lost a piece of his own heart.

But that didn’t matter in the end. Sonic had built a family in a world where he was a feared alien. He’d built a team of allies with other lost souls like him. He could find a way through to this hedgehog. No one was beyond saving.

“We don’t have to fight this guy,” Sonic called over his shoulder as he walked toward the chaotic scene. “Let me just go talk to him.”

“Sonic? I don’t think…” Tails’ voice trailed off, but Sonic knew what the situation called for. It was time for him to pull out the old Wachowski charm.

“Welcome to Earth, fellow hedgehog!” he said with a relaxed smile. “Listen, I know how you’re feeling right now. New planet. All alone. The next thing you know, half the city’s on fire. Trust me, I’ve been there…”

“Where is Walters?” the hedgehog growled, leveling Sonic with a look that could curdle milk.

“Walters?”

“The commander of the lying cowards of G.U.N.!”

This didn’t quite add up. If this guy knew Walters, what else could G.U.N. not be sharing? “Knowing that guy, he’s probably at a chain Italian place loading up on unlimited breadsticks.” Sonic tried to put his counterpart at ease. “But maybe I can take a message?”

“Walk away,” the shadowy one growled. “Before you and your little friends get hurt.”

Okay, that was not an ideal reply. Still, Sonic could keep this under control, he was sure.

“Oh, it’s a fight you want, new hedgehog?” Knuckles called, pounding one fist into his palm in preparation.

“Hold on, Knuckles…we’re just talking—” But Sonic’s plea came too late.

The echidna let a shiver of red energy curl up his arm and threw a powerful punch as he cried, “Let us talk with our fists!!”

The punch never landed. Even as Knuckles swung hard, Sonic saw the other hedgehog…glitch somehow? In an instant, the guy shivered in a shadowy blur and somehow materialized on Knuckles' weak side. He even balled up the echidna warrior like a wad of paper. And that was Knuckles' whole signature deal!

Swak-swak-swak-swak-swak-CRASH!

Their adversary let loose on the echidna with a flurry of punches, finally tossing Team Sonic's enforcer through a storefront window. Sonic and Tails rushed to their friend's side. Luckily it appeared his ego was bruised more than anything.

"Might be…a little…rusty," he mumbled as they pulled him to his feet.

"Who *is* this guy?" Sonic said as they watched the shadowy figure stalk angrily through the debris toward them.

"He is *much* more impressive than the hedgehog I fought previously," Knuckles said.

"You mean me?"

"Yes."

Sonic chose to ignore that for the moment. "Well, whoever he is, he can't take us all at once."

Yet the other hedgehog seemed to have a different plan in mind. He stomped toward the trio with a vengeful look in his eye and said, "You were warned. Now I'm going to make this *hurt*."

Before Sonic could even think, the adversary glitched again—suddenly appearing behind Sonic and grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. A fiery sound like a rocket taking off flashed, and in a blur, Sonic was raised fifty feet into the air. Then just as quickly, the other hedgehog spun him around midair and threw the hero to the ground. *Hard*.

Crunk!

Pavement cracked beneath Sonic's body, and he felt pain rattle from his toes to his teeth. He tried to stand, but even the cushion of static electricity his own powers generated couldn't soften such a blow. The impact of his body even blew Tails and Knuckles backward. Sonic stumbled to his knees.

"If you want to keep breathing, stay out of my way," called the hedgehog as he climbed onto an abandoned G.U.N. motorcycle, drawing up an energy pistol off the street as he did so. With a roar of the engine and peeling tires, the hedgehog spun away into the city.

“Okay…just a little light jog then,” Sonic wearily joked as he steadied himself into a racing stance. “If this guy wants to play a game of speed, he doesn’t know who he’s facing.”

“Sonic, chasing him is a bad idea,” said Tails.

“And when has that ever stopped me?”

Whoooooosh!

The world melted away. Tokyo’s colors became laser lines in a tunnel of speed as Sonic poured on his hardest sprint. Soon, the whirlwind of light was joined by the bright blue flaring of Sonic’s own chaotic energy as he pursued the hedgehog. There weren’t many creatures in the universe who knew what a speed like this looked like. Or what it felt like. But this dark twin of Sonic’s seemed experienced as he urged his motorcycle on, crackling with power of his own.

“Hey, where are you going?” Sonic called. “We forgot to trade email addresses!”

Choom! Choom!

The hedgehog aimed his G.U.N. blaster and fired off a few bursts that whizzed past Sonic’s quills. The guy meant business, but Sonic had dealt with worse. He’d outrun an army of Robotnik’s drones. A little laser fire couldn’t stop him. With a quick step, Sonic spun himself into a ball and blasted his way directly at the motorcycle. And he missed!

Ricocheting off the pavement on the far side of the street, Sonic saw his foe materialize back where he’d launched from. So, it wasn’t a glitch that this character used. He was teleporting somehow!

“Hey, no cheat codes!” Sonic called before speeding up next to the hedgehog. “Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. Let’s start over. Hi, I’m Sonic. I like puppies, the music of Billy Joel, and fast runs on the beach…”

“The only thing that runs fast on you is your mouth!” the other hedgehog growled before yanking the handlebars of his bike hard and speeding the cycle up the side of a skyscraper. It was honestly a pretty cool move. Yet Sonic could keep pace and go into attack mode.

They both flew up the glass side of the building. Sonic would swing a fist meant to delay the dark one only to see him barely flinch. The hedgehog would blast back with his blaster, only for Sonic to dodge and duck like a champ. After each electric step or screeching wheel spin, the only thing

either of them succeeded in beating was the force of gravity. They were just too evenly matched.

There was nothing left to do but go full force. Maybe if Sonic hit him with everything he had, the hedgehog would falter. Sonic sped up, leaping into the sky above for a final blast as his foe abandoned his bike and charged up for a similar desperate shot. The world seemed to go slow motion as they careened toward a collision.

CHOOOOOOM!

Sonic hit the landing atop the skyscraper like a ragdoll as everything around him went black. The shockwave of their fight spread out for miles. Across Tokyo, the neon lights died out. The towering buildings turned dark. Even the clouds in the sky seemed to obscure the moon, covering the world in one giant shadow.

Sonic had done this once before, when he first arrived on Earth. But this time the blackout left him vulnerable to the hedgehog who loomed over him. Couldn't *anything* slow this guy down?

"I gave you a chance to get out of here alive," the angry voice spat. "If you were smart, you would have taken it!"

"And if you were smart, you'd stop with that fake growly voice." Sonic stood his ground. "The whole grim and gritty thing is about a decade out of style, pal."

"Enough!"

But with a raised fist hanging above for a crushing final blow, the other hedgehog paused. He seemed disgusted with Sonic. "Learn your lesson well, fool!" he growled. "You are not my prey tonight, but if we ever cross paths again, I will not be so forgiving." And with a quick jerk of his hands, the other hedgehog slapped a pair of razor-sharp cuffs around Sonic's wrists, immobilizing him.

With a final fleeting glitch, the hedgehog teleported away. And Sonic was alone.

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CHAPTER 5

Being defeated in battle by an enemy unknown to you was a grievous insult to any proper warrior. As if this wasn't embarrassing enough already, now Knuckles had to suffer the indignity of licking his wounds in a play place for human children. All about him, soft pudding-like costumed servers toddled this way and that with legs far too small for their bodies and eyes far too big for their heads. He would have greatly preferred a vineyard of grapes.

"What is this unholy place?" he said as the little creatures offered them menus.

"It's called the Chao Garden!" Tails spoke up, overly enthusiastic as ever. "One of the top ten must-see spots in all of Tokyo. These mascots represent fantastical childlike spirits. So, it's a perfect place for us to blend in!"

Knuckles was not at all blending in. He was a warrior, born and bred. He had captured the Flames of Disaster from the fire demon Iblis. He had bested the Scavengers and their behemoth crustacean in the parlor of Casino Nights. He had even recaptured the Master Emerald from the vile charlatan Robotnik…Sonic and Tails' help notwithstanding. So, no. Knuckles did not blend in in this garden of cute.

"Oh, how cuuuuuuute!" a tourist beamed before snapping a selfie with the trio of heroes. Alas, Knuckles' indignity knew no end.

At last, the bells of the Chao Garden Café's door rang and brought a familiar face to their conclave. The elder statesman of G.U.N.—Commander Walters, of espionage tactics and breadstick cravings—entered.

"Sonic!" the old man cried, once again placing too much attention on the hedgehog. "Thank goodness you're all okay. I regret that I wasn't able

to properly brief you before the mission, but it was an emergency. I'm sure you have questions."

"A competing hedgehog has arrived with powers untold," Knuckles said. "The only question is how soon until I can best him in battle and reclaim my honor."

Sonic raised a finger in the air. "Actually, I have a few more questions besides that one," he said. "Like, who was this guy? What's his deal? Why does he hate you so much? And what intel can we get about him besides him being black, red, and really ticked off?"

Walters cleared his throat. "Well, to begin…his name is Shadow."

"That tracks," Tails said, nodding.

"Great. Shadow the Hedgehog. Totally not infringing on my copyright." Sonic rolled his eyes. "Please don't tell me he's some kind of top secret military project."

"Shadow was a top secret military project."

"Gah! Why don't you guys ever learn?!"

Walters shook his head, clearly struggling with his own disgrace. "Project Shadow was a mistake," he explained. "I've spent most of my life regretting it. You see, Shadow's story began a lot like yours, Sonic. But where you found family and friends on this planet…Shadow found only pain and loss."

"Where did he come from?" Tails inquired.

"No one knows exactly. Fifty years ago, a meteorite crashed on Earth." Walters took a laptop out and booted up a series of grainy security videos. "Perhaps it's best if I showed you."

On the screen, images of a smoldering crater cut in and out. At its heart, a glowing meteorite throbbed with energy—the kind of interplanetary transit Knuckles had only heard of in legends. An assembly of G.U.N. agents in black suits and shades took readings while an old farmer shook his head in disbelief.

"The country's top scientific minds were called in to study the crash site," Walters continued. "And soon, a brilliant scientist made a remarkable discovery. The meteorite contained a life-form. The *ultimate* life-form." On-screen, they could make out the outline of this new hedgehog floating in a laboratory tank, pieces of meteorite dissolving around his sleeping body. He looked nothing like an ultimate life-form to Knuckles. But what was

suspicious was the lead scientist in the video, standing in the shadows with only a long, twisting mustache clearly visible.

The images on-screen flickered ahead to a series of videos where the now revived Shadow was tested in feats of physical strength. Knuckles watched him run, jump, and pump out energy in a not unimpressive manner. Walters continued to explain. “Shadow’s power—his ‘chaos energy’ as you would call it—went far beyond any living creature’s. The scientist who discovered him believed this power would usher in a new era for mankind, creating breakthroughs in clean energy or medicine…even in time manipulation.”

“Time manipulation?” Tails exclaimed. “That must be how he appears to move so fast.”

“Precisely,” the commander agreed. “Shadow’s chaos energy allows him to bend time—jumping from one moment to another in short bursts.”

“Time jumps? Pfffft.” Sonic rolled his eyes. “So, he’s not even really running! Fake hedgehog. I’m totally faster.”

On the screen, one final run of footage presented itself. Shadow was no longer in a controlled environment. It showed a massive explosion that ripped a hole through the lab. “A terrible accident destroyed the lab, the experiment…everything,” Walters said gravely. “Human lives were lost. And I had no choice but to imprison the scientist whose reckless experiments had led to the tragedy.” The commander clapped the laptop shut. “Shadow himself was deemed too dangerous to go free and placed in cryo-freeze, where he remained for the past half a century.”

“Fifty years on ice is no fate for a warrior,” Knuckles said, bristling at Walters’ dispassionate expression.

“Well, that era ended today. Somehow, Shadow escaped and tracked me here to Tokyo, where I was attending the G.U.N. global defense conference.”

Knuckles and his pair of compatriots stood in silence, contemplating the remarkable story. Then suddenly, they realized they were not alone. In a semicircle behind them, the stuffed mascot creatures called Chao were leaning in for more. It was undignified.

“Do you mind?!” Sonic leaped up and began to push them toward the kitchen. “This is a private conversation! C’mon, shoo!” As the group of colorful creatures retreated, the hedgehog began to pace in front of Walters.

“So if Shadow’s been on ice for fifty years, there’s no way he’d be able to track you on his own. He must be working with someone.”

“Indeed he is, Sonic.” Walters was as serious as Knuckles had ever seen the man. “And I think I know who. This may sound impossible, but I believe Shadow is working with…”

But in that brief moment, the window of the tiny theme restaurant was flooded with a dozen red laser lights. They were being targeted, and only the hedgehog could stay a split second ahead of whatever danger was zeroing in.

“Everyone, get down!!” Sonic screamed right as the window exploded with fury.

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CHAPTER 6

Sonic had learned so much since coming to Earth. He learned the value of nutrition, like how sometimes you have to put onions on your chili dog. He learned the value of patience, like how sometimes it was appropriate to wait 4.7 seconds before opening a present. And of course, he learned the value of appreciating the beauty of your surroundings, like how the Chao Garden Café light glittered off the dozen ballistic missiles that were bursting through the front window at that very moment.

Luckily for all assembled, when such dangerous circumstances arose, Sonic had a talent. His whole body could engage in hyperspeed. Every quill tingled with chaotic energy to the point that the world around him seemed to slow to a standstill. He couldn't help but appreciate the way the light hit these deadly weapons, even if it wasn't the most appropriate time to do it.

But now it was time for action. With the room frozen in place, Sonic leaped over the table. It was like swimming through a bowl of gelatin at this speed, but with effort he was able to kick one red sneaker into Commander Walters' side and knock the old man from the path of danger. Reaching out with his gloved fists, Sonic tossed a few of the still-gathered Chao mascots to the floor. It was a shame no one could clearly see how dashing and heroic he was being.

Whhuuuuuuush!

With the throbbing sound of a subwoofer, Knuckles grabbed hold of a missile and spun it back the way it came. And Sonic could see Tails, too, rising over his shoulder to deflect another projectile. His pals weren't nearly as fast as the hedgehog, of course, but their own bursts of speed meant that these three were the only hope the restaurant patrons had for survival.

What followed was a split-second frenzy of Team Sonic's collective power. Neon lights from the city flooded through the window as each hero

took on a handful of missiles before they could blow up. It was kind of like a dance party.

Up near the ceiling, Tails had looped a lasso gizmo around two missiles and was swinging them around like a bucking bronco. The weapons' jet-fire may have lit the heads of a few Chao aflame, but that was fixable! To the right, Knuckles was beating back bomb after bomb with his massive fists. And sure, they were mostly exploding in the air, shaking the rest of the building's load-bearing pillars. But this place was probably insured for that! Sonic himself flipped back and forth a few times to swat the last missiles out of the window even as he watched his friends. Their slo-mo strategy had to be enough to save the day. They'd gotten all of the explosives, right?

KA-POW!

With a fiery force, one last missile landed in the center of the room and blew everyone left to the ground. Sonic felt its force, and the world snapped back to normal speed as he hit the wall on the far side of the café. He looked up through the smoke in fear. But through the haze, it seemed that both Knuckles and Tails were battered yet stable. The Chao mascots and customers had escaped only mildly traumatized. That only left…

"Walters!" Sonic rushed to the side of the collapsed secret agent. "Commander Walters? Are you okay?!"

"Ugghhh…" The old man's voice was weak and raspy.

"Hedgehog!" Knuckles called out. "Prepare for battle! A second wave has arrived."

Sonic turned to see a small fleet of his worst nightmare: egg drones! The gleaming, airborne robotic assistants of his nemesis Dr. Robotnik. But Robotnik was dead…wasn't he?

"Uh…Sonic? Any plan here?" Tails nervously turned around as the red laser sights of the egg drones zeroed in on their bodies.

Sonic rose to his feet with a stumble. They were all still feeling the pain of the explosion, but that was no excuse to lie down on the job. "We're going to have to suck 'em up in a whirlwind," he said as his friends nodded. "On my mark…three…two…"

Vrooooom!

With a roar, a black motorcycle under the command of a mystery rider jumped over the debris and circled the trio. The egg drones scattered at its arrival, giving the rider just enough time to flick out a handful of tiny

devices from his wrist. Each coin-size contraption attached itself to a drone, and before Sonic could say “one,” each enemy robot shuddered with a burst of electricity and fell to the ground.

“Solid!” Tails said enthusiastically. “A miniaturized electromagnetic pulse. Impressive tech!”

The rider leaned his bike low to the ground. With a small multi-tool, he expertly unscrewed the top plate from an egg drone and reached into its circuitry to pull out a thin black drive.

“Yeah, hi.” Sonic approached the rider cautiously and tried to get a look under the onyx shade of his helmet. “Thanks for saving our buns back there, but who—”

Vrooooom!

And with that one rev on the handlebar, the motorcycle and their unknown savior were back through the broken window and speeding down the city street.

“Quickly!” Knuckles cried. “Follow that motored cycle!”

But for once, Sonic wasn’t willing to rush headfirst into the unknown. Because now there was someone he felt responsible for lying on the ground. Ugh. Responsibility? Is this what Tom and Maddie were always going on about? It did *not* feel all that great.

“We can’t just leave Walters!” Sonic shouted after his departing friends. But then the old man came to.

“Sonic,” he said weakly as he pulled what looked like a small leather wallet out of his suit coat. It was emblazoned with an orange kind of half-moon logo. No, that wasn’t a moon. It was an eclipse. “Take this,” Walters commanded. “You’re the only one who can keep it safe. It’s what Shadow wants. A key to the most powerful weapon G.U.N. has ever built. If he gets it, all life on Earth could be threatened.”

Sonic stared at the device. “Sonic, you have to stop him before he hurts others,” Walters choked out and then went unconscious on the café floor. Yeah, this was definitely the kind of responsibility Sonic was looking to avoid.

On the ground, a radio receiver had fallen from Walters’ pocket and crackled to life with the voice of the woman who’d brought them here, Director Rockwell. She sounded super mean and bossy, but like, not in the cool girl-boss way. “Alert to all G.U.N. units. The Commander is MIA, and

I am ordering an immediate Capture or Kill order on *all* alien creatures," she said. "None of the animals can be trusted. Repeat: Capture or Kill!"

If that was how it was going to be, Sonic was going to show them all a better way of being. But first, they had to get some cover.

"What is your delay?" Knuckles asked impatiently at the corner. "Were you not the self-christened 'Fastest Thing Alive'?"

"First off, still am." Sonic smiled. "Secondly, put these on. We need cover because our mystery man isn't the only dangerous force out there." He threw his two friends a few leftover Chao heads as the sounds of police sirens blared daringly close. "Let's go!"

To avoid capture, Team Sonic escaped the destroyed Chao Garden disguised as adorable Chao mascots. When they were in the clear, they immediately took off their disguises and in streaks of blue, red, and gold, sped down the streets. It was nearing midnight, and Tokyo was still flooded with people. But Sonic was quick enough to trace the sound of that ninja-like motorcycle toward the waterfront.

The bike struck out toward a lonely pier, but before the rider could gun the throttle off into the ocean, Sonic took a mascot head and rolled it under the bike's tire. Perfect strike! As the vehicle slid to a halt, the hedgehog zipped into place next to it and knocked on the rider's helmet politely. "Hold it right there, mysterious motorcycle person!" he said in his most Donut Lord–sounding voice. Tom would be proud. "Who are you?"

Knuckles and Tails pulled up on either side of the rider. They had him trapped now, and Sonic was sure he was going to reveal himself as a renegade ninja or a member of the yakuza. Sonic wasn't 100 percent sure what the word meant, but he heard it on TV a lot, and it sounded criminal and cool.

Yet as the man pulled his dark helmet off, he revealed a face no one had expected and certainly hadn't hoped for.

"It's the goat milker!" Knuckles cried.

Wait. What?!? The coffee-making, identity-stealing weirdo who followed Dr. Robotnik around like a lost puppy had saved their lives? How did that track?

"Excuse me," the man sneered. "My name is Agent Stone, you intergalactic aardvark."

“Why did *you* save us?” Tails asked incredulously. “And what are you doing in Tokyo?”

“Looking for answers, just like you.”

“Umm, pretty sure the answers are obvious.” Sonic strolled around him flicking off accusations on his fingers. “It’s clear that you and Eggman are back, and that you freed Shadow, and then attacked Walters!”

“No,” Stone said. “The doctor is responsible for many brilliant but villainous acts, but this latest string of events wasn’t his plan. And I can prove it.”

Stone reached into his biker jacket (which actually looked way cooler than Sonic was willing to admit out loud) and pulled out a small key fob.

Twerp! Twerp! Whooooooosh!

At the press of a button, a massive Crab Mech the size of a jet plane arose from the bottom of the harbor. Seawater sloshed off its side as its razor-sharp legs snapped into place. Sonic and his team took defensive stances, ready for another bruising battle. But then Agent Stone did the last thing any of them were ready for. He acted nicely.

“Please, join me in the crab,” he said.

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CHAPTER 7

Robotnik was no mere man. He wasn't one of those squishy, soft-bodied suburbanites who lapped up milkshakes and mediocrity from the trough corporate America laid out. He was a supreme specimen. An illustrious intellect. And after a meticulous mechanical merging with the Master Emerald, he had even ascended to the status of cosmic god!

But that was before the intervention of that blasted blue hedgehog. And now, oh how the mighty had fallen.

He could still see it in his mind's eye (which had perfect photographic recall, of course). His Giant Eggman Robot towering over the silly little town. People fleeing in terror at the exercising of his absolute power and authority. And then the golden gleam of that ultra-powered rat blasting everything he'd made into oblivion.

Yet Robotnik had survived. He'd gone underground. And what he found there was a light that could sustain his mind even in the depths of despair and failure. He'd found 217 episodes of betrayal, heartbreak, and the superbly twirling mustache of a villain who enthralled millions of fans across Mexico, Latin America, and certain pockets of the American Southwest that had good taste. It was delicioso in the extreme and not remotely pathetic. That's science.

"Treason's greetings, my streaming sycophants. I have returned to deduce, debate, and dissect the latest episode of *La Última Pasión*!" he intoned into his phone to what Stone had assured him were an army of social media followers. A clever mustachioed filter kept his identity a secret for security purposes, but he was certain his genius was evident from the depth of his media analysis. "Let today's twist be a lesson to Juan: Family is a weakness that will only abandon, betray, and destroy you. Listen to your cerebro, not your corazón, tu imbécil!"

Robotnik's Spanish had improved greatly over the binge. He now knew how to insult, berate, and belittle everyone around him in two languages. And that came in handy.

"Stone! Are you back from the store?" he called at the sound of a hatch opening. "We're out of goat's leche!"

"Doctor…we have visitors," came the voice of his attendant. Behind Stone walked…

"Perish in flames, foul nemeses!" Robotnik reached for the closest weapon of animal destruction, which turned out to be a drone that short-circuited with a *splotch* from all the guacamole and salsa it had inside.

"Not my burrito drone!" Robotnik groaned. "¡Qué mal! What's the point? They win. *Again*."

The hedgehog stepped forward. That most hated, heinous little furball never had time for anything but back talk and disrespect for the doctor's brilliance. So why did he now look upon Robotnik with an expression of pity?

"I don't believe it. Eggman's alive!"

"And he's never looked…worse?" said Sonic's fox sidekick. To be described thus by an inferior life-form and an inferior inventor? Truly, this was his lowest moment.

"This is sad, Robotnik. Even for you," spoke the gravelly voice of his erstwhile ally, Knuckles the Echidna. Once again, Robotnik was proven wrong. *Now* was his lowest moment.

"Since your last battle, the doctor has been aimlessly wandering the planet in a bit of a, shall we say, existential tailspin," Stone said with a stiff upper lip.

Robotnik sunk lower into his couch—his last source of true comfort in this world. "What do I do with my pointless, pitiful existence?" he lamented. "I had ultimate power in the palm of my hand! I was once a Pablo—filled with the fire and thirst for conquest! Now I'm just a pathetic Juan—left with nothing…no one…nada…"

On the screen, the dulcet tones of the actors on *La Última Pasión* carried Robotnik back into a state of reverie. If only he could rewax his mustache to the level of Pablo—curly, confident, and cruel as only a true mastermind can command an upper lip to be. Now the doctor's own 'stache drooped low with the floppy form of a soggy tortilla.

“Since the crash, the doctor has gotten very into telenovela soap operas after a recent stay in Mexico,” Stone said.

“Ah yes.” Knuckles stroked his chin. “I am familiar with this *La Última Pasión* after a recent sojourn to Reno, Nevada.”

“So, you’re a fan then?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You should check it out. It makes a great binge,” Robotnik said with the weight of his many lost months sinking into his brain. It seemed today the only energy he had left after his brush with power was the juice it took to wallow in his self-pity. But he would do that better than any fallen scientist ever had! “Oh, none of it matters anymore! My days of evildoing and world-dominating are over. I…am done!”

Robotnik collapsed to the most depressed cushion in dramatic style. If he could not scheme with the power of a Pablo, he would wail with the anguish of an Isabella.

“C’mon, man.” Sonic circled him suspiciously. “You expect us to believe that you had nothing to do with Shadow’s escape and attack on Tokyo?”

“We’re in Tokyo right now?” Robotnik had not realized where he was. Or what day it was. Or when he last showered. “Alas, I had no part in this attack you speak of. A true genius never takes credit for another’s work.”

“Well, someone’s taking credit for your work,” the fox warned cryptically.

“Show him, minion,” said Knuckles.

Stone looked nervously about the room. Having such a dedicated manservant had many advantages, but their paralyzing fear of disappointing you was not one of them. Robotnik would have to remember to smack that fear out of him when the two were alone later.

After a moment, Stone finally hooked a small black drive to the Crab Mech’s interior wall of security monitors. They flickered to life, showing the fish-eyed view of his own proprietary technology. And whatever shot this footage was zooming in on his three animal foes surrounded by…a fleet of his own egg drones?

“NO!” he cried, leaping to his feet. “My sweet machines! Whomever the galactic garbage squad is looking for has also stolen my precious babies. That can only mean one thing…Ivo Robotnik has an impostor!”

“First of all, how am I just learning that your first name is Ivo?” Sonic said. “Secondly, do you mind closing that robe, doctor?” He winced at Robotnik’s full splendor.

Bah! What was exposing his flabby form compared to the thrill of finding a new purpose? Just as every telenovela had taught him over thousands of binged hours, there was only one constant virtue in this life… revenge! And as he paced through the bowels of his Crab Mech, Robotnik began to feel a new vengeful idea forming in his oh-so-accomplished brain.

“By cross-referencing the precise longi- and-latitudinal coordinates of each drone’s energy spikes…amplified by their optical frequency multiplier and intensity radiative flux…I can determine the impostor’s specific base of operations right…here!” A flurry of typing called up a digital map on the monitor bank. In the middle of it all, a red blinking dot burned like the growing fury in Robotnik’s own heart. “Stone, fire up the crab.”

“With pleasure, sir.” His majordomo saluted before shaking the shoulders of the fox with glee. “He’s back! Again!”

“Hold on.” The rotten blue hedgehog stepped in even as the mobile base began to hum back to life. “You think we’re gonna let you go after these guys without us? You’re an unhinged evil madman.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” Robotnik replied. Even he could acknowledge the respect of his enemies when it arrived.

“Not a compliment!” Sonic screeched. “And it’s our job to take down Shadow and whoever he’s working with. So, wherever you’re going, we’re going, too. Don’t even try to outrun us.”

Robotnik immediately made a break to outrun them. A swivel brought him face-to-face with the fox. A nudge to the right found Knuckles waiting for battle. And a slide in between them only had Sonic tapping his foot with annoying impatience.

“Touché,” the doctor said, relenting in the end. “While my beautiful mind can outrun yours by light-years, my feeble legs cannot. It appears any attempt to catch this mysterious marauder must come with you attached to my hip.” But a particularly perverse idea was forming in his mind. “I propose an alliance…an armistice…a treaty…a team-up, even!”

He held out a hand for the hedgehog’s blistering ridiculous glove to take hold of. And the creature took the bait.

Yes, Robotnik had fallen. But if he could not be the villain he once was, maybe he could be reborn as a hero…until the moment when such a pose was of no more use to him. Much like Pablo had once played the part of his virtuous identical primo, Pancho, in *La Última Pasión*, the doctor would take on the role of daring do-gooder for now. It would be easy enough to act just like the pathetic protagonist of the program.

"¡Ahora, retomo mi destino!" cried the enfeebled Juan on the television screen, and Robotnik repeated the call in a tongue these simpletons could understand. "Today, I take back my destiny!" Then he took a moment's pause. "But first, Stone? Make me a latte."

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CHAPTER 8

For as long as he could remember, Shadow the Hedgehog had dreamed of escape. The doctor always told him that his origins and destiny lay beyond the stars, but from the moment he first opened his eyes, all he ever knew was G.U.N. When Shadow awoke in their clutches, he wanted to believe the system built by these so-called men was honest and true. They called themselves guardians. They said they worked to preserve the peace of nations. And of course, one way or the other, they brought Maria into his life. But that was before they so cruelly took her away.

That was when Shadow knew he must escape their kind for good. So then why had he agreed to return to the heart of their horrible experiment?

The wind blew cold and stung like a needle outside the lab of the so-called Project Shadow. Fifty years had passed since he was last here, but underneath the faded CONDEMNED PROPERTY signs on the outside fence, the place was as empty and sterile as Shadow remembered it. Only the girl gave this place life.

Inside the facility, the cryo-tank in which Shadow was once studied looked just as harsh as his memories, even though its glass was now shattered to pieces. He traced a finger over a jagged edge and remembered. This was where they'd first met. Day after day, still shocked from his intergalactic arrival on Earth, Shadow would open his eyes to a room full of the strange, hairless creatures. That was until one morning when a small human—barely taller than him—approached and touched the glass. He eyed her suspiciously, but the small one simply pulled out a stubby writing tool and marked the tank with a curious symbol. A smile.

Shadow could not help but return the gesture, and their friendship was born.

It was hard not to think back on that bond now as the hedgehog stalked the silent hallways that were once filled with laughter. Here, they would race the hallways on roller skates. They'd stay up late and watch monster movies. And sometimes, they'd even be able to sneak out and lie on the compound lawn to watch the night sky. Why had he ever gone back inside?

"Wow. Look at all those planets and stars," Maria once told him. "I wonder which one you come from."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about my home."

"This is your home, Shadow. Earth."

"It doesn't feel like it. The way the scientists look at me. They're afraid of me. Like I'm the monster in one of your scary movies. Do you think that's who I am?"

Maria rolled up on an elbow and crinkled her brow at him in a way that meant all his internal anguish was silly. "I know exactly who you are," she said. "You're my friend. And you can do—or be—anything you want. Not because of your powers, but because of who you are…" She pointed to the center of his chest. "…In here."

Those early months were a whirlwind. Maria was the only person in that lab who offered Shadow her own name—not the authoritative titles of "Captain" or "Doctor" so many other humans insisted on. She would bring him treats and draw him pictures. She showed him the joy of running, even if he could only ever run on a circular track. She showed him what it meant to be alive, even if it was living in a cage.

But the reality of their life always found ways to bleed in. As he made his way to the living quarters they once shared, Shadow was struck with a much sadder memory: the first fight G.U.N. had over Maria's existence. In retrospect, that was the beginning of the end.

"This is highly unorthodox, Walters!" a lab-coated technician barked. "You've got a child scrawling messages in marker all over one of the most important scientific laboratories in the world. It's not just a joke…it's dangerous!"

"Maria is our lead researcher's granddaughter!" the young G.U.N. captain snapped back. "Keeping him happy is priority one for you. And as for her creative streak, it appears to keep the Ultimate Life-Form subdued, which is frankly all I care about. So unless you have a better suggestion for achieving our objectives, I suggest you…oh! Shadow!"

They shut up once they knew he was listening, but the damage was done. From there on out, Shadow knew that he and Maria were on their own. He just didn't realize how soon after they would come for her…or that Walters would be the agent of their destruction.

But vengeance was not far off now. The doctor had promised him that. All he had to do now was wait here, in their living quarters. Shadow stood still as stone in the only place he'd ever been happy. It was so pathetic to think of it that way, but it was true. This was his home. And once it was taken from him, there was only one thing to do in response.

"This is for you, Maria," he said. "All of this is for you."

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CHAPTER 9

Zam!

A massive ring portal lit up the skies just long enough for Sonic to read the faded CONDEMNED PROPERTY signs on the fence ahead of them. Robotnik seemed to be taking them where he said he would, but you could never be too careful about these things.

As they approached whatever this abandoned property was, an icy wind whipped through Sonic's quills. He shivered at the touch of it. But the hedgehog couldn't tell what made him feel worse: the creepiness of this place or the fact that he had to trust ol' Eggman to take them closer to their goal. Either way, he wanted to get this mission over with faster than fast.

"Ingenious design!" Robotnik called out as he, Team Sonic, and Agent Stone approached the main building's massive door. "This door is six inches thick, solid steel on a pressurized latch. I'd say that I couldn't have made it better myself, but of course, there's no feat of engineering I can't improve on." Just like an evil genius to monologue his way through a mission. Gross. "Anyway, I'll need a moment to invert the venting mechanics and create a suitable…"

Clunk!

With one punch, Knuckles busted the door's lock and sent each half of the barrier skittering down an empty hallway.

"I unlocked it," Sonic's gruff friend said.

"Subtle as always," Robotnik sneered in reply.

"Keep on doing your thing, buddy." Sonic patted the echidna on the shoulder and strutted through. "One thing you gotta learn, Ro-Butt-Nik, is that when you're out hero-ing, you can't always stop to smell the science. All we've got to do is figure out what this place is."

“It looks like some kind of old military base,” Tails noted, scanning every inch of the dark hallway with his device. “This is G.U.N. property from the looks of it, but they scrubbed the place clean long ago. I wonder if it’s haunted.”

“Haunted?” Knuckles bristled at the word. “What do you mean haunted?”

“Oh, boogie boogie boogie!” Robotnik taunted. “Scared of g-g-ghosts?”

“Nothing scares an Echidna warrior. *Nothing*.”

They reached a fork in the path. Ahead of them, three identical hallways stretched out into equal patches of pitch black. Whatever this Shadow guy was hunting for was ahead of them, but how to find it wasn’t Sonic’s specialty.

“Let’s split up!” the doctor said. “Everyone with hideous brightly colored fur, take the left or middle. Stone and I will go right, and then…”

“Oh no!” Sonic cut in. “I’m not letting you out of my sight. Eggman, you and me can go right. Tails, you and Stone go left. Knuckles, take the middle.”

Tails hopped to, as enthusiastic as always. Sonic watched his flashlight shine down the left hallway as Agent Stone’s voice echoed along, asking, “So, Tails, what’s it like being Sonic’s assistant?”

“I’m not his assistant!” the fox said. “We’re best friends. Like you and Eggman, right?”

“Oh yes,” Stone said defeatedly as his voice began to fade. “Me and the doctor. Best friends…definitely what we are…” It was almost enough to make you feel bad for the guy, the way you’d feel bad for a lost puppy.

“And so I will go this way. Alone,” Knuckles said after a beat. “And that is fine. Because nothing scares an Echidna warrior. You hear that, ghosts?! You do not frighten me! It is you who should cower in fear!”

“If you see anything dangerous, just punch a hole in the wall!” Sonic called after his friend. “Well, I guess that just leaves you and me, Ivo. Still can’t get used to calling you that, by the way.”

“Under the circumstances, I will also answer to Master, Your Greatness, or His High Exalted Genius of Scientific Theory and Practice, if that makes you more comfortable, hedgehog.” Robotnik strode ahead down the tunnel, acting more and more like his old self. Sonic stayed on his toes. There was no telling when a double cross might arrive.

The pair of foes searched the dusty remains of the base. The airy echoes of their footsteps bounced around each new pathway or laboratory. But nothing useful presented itself. At last, they came upon a room that wasn't stripped bare for parts: an apartment of sorts with couches, beds, even an old TV. And Sonic could tell by the dust motes floating in the air, someone had recently been in this room.

"Whoa," Sonic marveled as Robotnik shined a light on the scene. "This place wasn't just a base or a lab…it was a home. A family lived here…"

"Pfft," the Eggman spat. "Family? A word synonymous with disappointment."

"Spoken with big loser energy," Sonic said. "Come on, Eggman, you never wondered how your life would have turned out if you had a family? Maybe you wouldn't have gone full supervillain!"

"It is pointless to hypothesize an impossibility. My genius-genealogy ends with yours truly. I even hacked the DNA databases of the world to confirm that every other strand was kaput. I am the *only* Robotnik left. All family ever left me was a worthless middle initial. I never cared for the letter *G* after that."

"Ivo G. Robotnik?!" Sonic laughed as he stepped through the darkened room. "It gets better and better! Let me guess, the *G* stands for Geek? No, too easy. It must be Gizmo…or Gear-Loose! Then again, 'Ivo Gruesome Robotnik' has a nice ring to it!"

Shunk!

Suddenly, a thick metal door slammed shut behind Sonic. "Hey, Eggman!" he called out, pounding on the barrier with no handle in sight. "Did you do that? Because if so, not cool, man!" Sonic's killer sense of humor had never been turned against him like this.

Sonic scanned the new room and realized that running lights had activated around a high-tech lab setup. Even G.U.N. couldn't have yanked everything out of this place. A massive glass tank anchored the center of the room. It was the same one Sonic had seen on Walters' video feed back at the Chao Garden Café, only now its glass was cracked into pieces. But that's not what caught Sonic's eye. On the far side of the space, a splash of color shone between two discarded computer banks.

As he approached, Sonic could make out a series of children's drawings. There was a field of shining stars climbing up the wall, and

beneath those, two figures stood hand in hand with big toothy smiles beaming out. One was a little girl with blond hair, and the other one was… Shadow. It looked so much like Sonic's own cave drawing of himself next to Longclaw that his heart skipped a beat.

At the very bottom corner, Sonic could just make out one final clue. Written in a kid's hand was the message "To My Best Friend Shadow… Love, Maria."

"I knew you'd come here to kill me," growled a now familiar voice. "But not if I kill you first!"

Smash!

Shadow appeared from nowhere, swinging Sonic around and through the remaining glass of the cryo-tank. The force hurt less than the fact that this guy had gotten the jump on him once again.

"To be clear, I'm here to talk to you," Sonic said as he rolled and regained his balance. "You know what talking is, right? Hedgehog to hedgehog?"

"Don't lie!" His opponent was full of rage. "G.U.N. sent you to take me out."

With another glitching time jump, Shadow curled Sonic's skull in one hand like a basketball and lifted him in the air.

"Okay, technically yes, but the funny thing is, I kinda want to help you now!"

"You should be begging for help!" Shadow shouted and threw Sonic away. A series of pummeling blows followed as the blue hedgehog tried to fight force with reason. It's what Tom would have wanted, right?

"Shadow, listen," Sonic said, sliding away from speeding fists. "I know something terrible happened to you here…"

"You don't know anything about me or what I've been through!"

"I think I do." Sonic tried again. "Because I know what it feels like to lose someone you care about!"

Wham!

A punch finally connected and sent Sonic skittering across the floor. Luckily, he landed right next to the marker mural. He pointed to the image of Shadow and this Maria girl, pleading his case. "When I came to this planet, I'd lost the most important person in my life. I thought I had no one. But I was lucky enough to meet a friend. His name is Donut Lord…Tom,

really. And if *anything* ever happened to him, I'd be just as angry as you are."

Shadow stopped. He turned away, his breathing heavy, but his body still. Maybe Sonic was finally getting through to him.

"That's why I know I can help you." Sonic reached out a hand. "You may not believe me, but we're a lot more alike than you know…"

"I'm *nothing* like you," Shadow said as a shiver of red energy built through his body like electric rage. In a blink, he turned one powerful punch Sonic's way, and then the world went black.

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CHAPTER 10

Robotnik was alone. And that's just the way he liked it.

Calculating the probability of what might happen in this third-rate remnant of a scientific facility had been easy enough. The odds that the animal agents stupid enough to trust him would be taken out by their mysterious enemy? Four to one. That Agent Stone would somehow get himself sidelined before he could be of any use? Sadly, ten to one. That the vile speedy needle-mouse would walk his way into a trap? Two to one at best.

But the only probability that mattered in the end was the question of whether Robotnik himself would be the last man standing. And that was a virtual certainty. Now all he had to do was achieve his true objective: steal back his beloved technology from whatever simpleton impostor was trying to claim his name.

Through the dark of the base, the doctor's nimble fingers flew over his control glove's keypad. Its display led him out of the shabby living quarters like cheese led a rat through a maze. And at last, he found himself in a surprisingly slick workshop. The hardware there seemed up to date, but that's only because at its heart sat…

"My darlings!" Robotnik cried as he fell to his knees and embraced six kidnapped egg drones. He thought he'd never see them again. "How dare someone take you from me? I'll never let their filthy little fingers touch you again!"

"Ah, ah, ah," a creaky voice called from the shadows far across the workshop. "Don't make a promise you can't keep, my boy."

"Who goes there?" Robotnik hurled the question like a bomb. "Show yourself, and I'll grant you an efficient end from my bots' lacerating lasers!" With a flick of a switch, the egg drones floated to life around his

head, their red eyes throbbing with menace. “Trust me, it’s a better way to go than being sliced and diced by their mechanized mandibles.”

“Oh, I’d be shaking in my booties.” The voice chuckled. “If I couldn’t simply reply to your threats with…come to papa.”

With that phrase, the egg drones ceased all defensive maneuvers and floated across the room, where they circled the stranger with a gentle ease only Robotnik had ever commanded before. It was enough to turn the doctor’s blood cold. Or at least colder than it already was, which was quite chilly.

“I…I don’t believe it,” Robotnik said as he made out the outline of a twirling gray mustache and a bald pate on the man who now commanded his own brilliant creations. “This is impossible. Illogical. Preposterously paradoxical…”

“Yes, Ivo, it’s true. I am in fact…”

“The impostor who stole my babies!” Robotnik shouted. He couldn’t help it, for the man who stepped from the shadows didn’t just have his egg drones. He also had Robotnik’s face.

“They are magnificent creations, my boy,” the impostor cooed. He couldn’t be a clone, because up close Robotnik could see the crow’s feet underneath this man’s goggles that showed decades of aging that he himself had not yet lived. “Sorry to use your tech without permission, but it was the only way to lure you here and reunite our family. You see, Ivo…I’m your grandfather.”

“G-g-g-g—” Robotnik choked on the letter, finally spitting out the name he’d only read on his own birth certificate before now. “Gerald Robotnik?”

No. It couldn’t be. It was a sham. A ruse. A holographic projection at best. A leftover hallucination from Robotnik’s time imprisoned on that contemptible planet of mushrooms, perhaps. But a long-lost grandfather? His scientific mind rejected the premise as patently absurd. “Prove it,” he demanded.

“Test me!” The old man raised his hand theatrically. It was a bit much, to be honest. “Like all great Robotniks, I have the answer to *everything*!”

If it was to be a battle of wits, then Robotnik would cull the depths of his computerlike cranium to flummox this fiendish apparition. “What is the most beautiful formula in all mathematics?” he cried.

“Euler’s Identity. *E* to the power of *i* times *pi* plus one equals zero!”

“European capitals arranged alphabetically by fourth letter?”

“Riga, Monaco, Sarajevo, Tirana…”

“Speed of light, divided by the speed of sound, multiplied by the speed of a speeding bus?”

“12,139 miles per second!”

“The Mark III Master System is…?”

“A criminally underrated game console whose innovative use of graphics far outstrips our understanding of what a mere eight bits can do!”

Jumping Jehoshaphat! Even Robotnik could hardly comprehend the implications of this discovery, which meant that no other mind on Earth could comprehend it. But one mind of course could comprehend it because that mind stood before him now!

“Grandpa Gerald!” Robotnik cried for joy. The implications of this discovery were endless. But for starters, it meant that he would have to start referring to himself as “Ivo” in all his internal monologues to keep things from getting too confusing.

“In the flesh and looking pretty good for one hundred and ten years young.” The old man smiled. “Now how ’bout a hug for grampie?”

They embraced. It was the first real thrilling physical human contact Ivo Robotnik could recall in his life. And stunningly less gross than he’d imagined such a thing. “Oh, Grandfather,” he said. “I think I’ve waited my entire life for a moment like this! Which reminds me: Where have you been my entire life?!”

“I was locked in a top secret prison for the past fifty years,” Grandpa Gerald explained. “That makes it kinda hard to send Christmas cards. But sentimentality can wait for a later date. For now, we’ve got a clutch of rodents to exploit, my boy.”

“You know about the hedgehog and his ilk?” Ivo asked.

“Hedgehogs!” Gerald cackled. “Like I said…I have the answer to everything.”

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CHAPTER 11

Sonic shook himself awake when his cheek hit the cold metal floor. His head still ached from the last blow he took, but that wasn't what hurt most. What really stung was the fact that his arms and legs were tied tight with some kind of restraint. There was no way for him to run. And nowhere for him to run to. For the moment, at least.

"You know, pal, if you wanted to practice tying your Hog Scout knots, I could have helped you do it with something a little more low stakes like a pair of branches or some leftover dynamite," Sonic called after Shadow, who walked away from him with indifference.

"Bite your tongue!" called a voice high above. Sonic looked up to see his more familiar foe, only this time the doctor was…wrinklier?

"Eggman?" He blinked at the sight. "But you're so…*old*."

"Can it, foul space vermin!" replied the elderly man.

"Yeah, you wretched lawn weasel!" cried another Robotnik. This one looked more like the real thing, but…was Sonic seeing double now?

"Someone tell me this is a concussion-induced nightmare!" Sonic groaned. "There are two Eggmen now?!"

"You must be the long-lost grandson," Shadow said, looking at who must have been Ivo Robotnik up and down as he took his place between the mad scientists.

"And you must be…another hedging hedgehog!" Ivo could barely contain his disgust.

"Ivo, meet Shadow…my greatest discovery," said the old man.

A horrible realization struck Sonic's aching brain. "Wait…Grandpa Robotnik was the G.U.N. scientist who got Shadow locked in cryo-freeze?" He tried to appeal to his dark double one last time. "Shadow, my man, we really are alike. We've both got a Robotnik trying to ruin our lives!"

“This is not yet the worst of it, my friend,” Knuckles called out.

Sonic looked to his right and saw that both Knuckles and Tails were tied up on the far side of the room. All three heroes were on the floor of some kind of test track chamber. It must have been the heart of Project Shadow where the older Robotnik experimented on the misguided hedgehog decades before.

“Oh, hey guys,” Sonic called to his friends. “Great to see you here. I was starting to worry that I was really in big trouble until just now.”

“You’re in more trouble than you know, you smooth-brained miscreant,” the elder Robotnik called from his perch above. “My dream of fully harnessing chaos energy and inspiring a new era of scientific innovation is finally at hand. With you in my clutches, I can complete my work and build a beacon of salvation for all humanity without the interference of G.U.N. and its thugs.”

“Funny you should mention them,” Sonic said. “Walters told us this lab accident that ended your research was *your* fault.”

“Walters *lied*!” the old man screamed. “He’s a spy who deceives small, pathetic minds like yours to cover his tracks. All the while, the innocent are locked away to die with the truth. Like me…and my family. Those monsters tried to steal Shadow’s power out from under me. They wanted to create a superweapon. And when they were exposed, my granddaughter paid the price.”

Shadow squeezed his eyes tight in pain, and Sonic finally saw how the pieces fit together. “Maria…,” he said.

“Precisely,” Grandpa Robotnik said. “My beloved Maria—Ivo’s cousin—was lost while Shadow and I were blamed for G.U.N.’s atrocities. I spent fifty years in prison with nothing but my grief and the residual chaos energy I’d absorbed from Shadow’s quills keeping me alive. But after decades of mulling the unsolvable problem of how to exact my revenge, a plot formed in my mind. If G.U.N. wanted a superweapon, I would design them one in exchange for my freedom. And once free, I would deliver them the key to their own destruction…the Eclipse Cannon!”

The older man clicked his fingers together, and above their heads a giant hologram of a laser-powered satellite shimmered into focus. Grandpa Robotnik walked down a ramp to the floor where they lay, which made

Sonic nervous partly because this guy was a dangerous nut but also because he did *not* look like he smelled good.

"My masterpiece!" the old Robotnik cheered.

"An interstellar orbital defense system designed to neutralize extraordinary threats!" Ivo marveled.

"What cowardly nonsense is this?" Knuckles called.

"It's basically a big, giant space laser," Tails said nervously.

"And we're one step closer to stealing it back, thanks to our sub-mentally stupid blue friend here." Grandpa grinned as he leaned over Sonic's restrained form. "Thanks for delivering Commander Walters' launch key, Sonic! You saved us a lot of work."

"Wait—no! You can't!" Sonic strained against the bonds, but he was powerless to stop the old man from reaching into his sock and taking the device with the eclipse symbol that Walters had entrusted him with. In the future, Sonic had to get some kind of a fanny pack with a padlock on it or at least something with zip-up pockets!

"The second launch key is locked away in G.U.N. Headquarters in London," the wrinkled madman said as he ran back up the ramp. "With that in hand, Shadow and I can take control of the glorious weapon and annihilate the monsters who betrayed us. But what good is revenge if you can't do it with your family? What say you, Ivo? Wanna steal a giant space laser with Grandpa?"

"Let me get this straight," original recipe Robotnik said. "You miraculously kept yourself alive for decades in prison, negotiated your way out, stole my technology, released the Ultimate Life-Form, which is a wicked hedgehog, and lured me to this exact location where our family was destroyed…all to recruit me for an evil mission to extinguish the souls of the men who ruined our lives?"

"Bingo."

"I'm in, Gramps!" Ivo laughed. "But what do we do with this space swine?"

The older doctor didn't even look back at where Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles lay. "They'll be killed instantly in a chaos-powered vortex that will wipe this wretched place from existence," he said and tossed an egg drone down that landed in between Sonic and his friends.

“Wow, you really are a Robotnik!” Ivo said with pride as Agent Stone appeared to lead the villains away.

“Shadow, wait!” Sonic called. “You don’t have to do this! You still have a choice!”

“I made my choice long ago,” Shadow replied and followed his team out.

“Have a nice death, losers!” called one of the Robotniks. It was hard to say which.

Team Sonic was on their own now. The egg drone began to beep and crackle and shake in a way that didn’t seem like they were going to have much time. But Sonic wasn’t ready to give up just yet.

Whoooooosh!

In the middle of the test track, the drone morphed into a miniature black hole, and like a plug had been pulled from the world’s weirdest bathtub, Sonic felt the swirling pull of oblivion. Sheets of metal began to peel up off the floor at the center of the room and get sucked away. Sonic couldn’t fight its pull…so he didn’t try to.

“Hold on…I’m coming your way!” he cried and rolled his body until the force of the vortex slid him around the room to Knuckles and Tails’ position. With the force of a cannonball, Sonic slid into his best friends *hard*, but thankfully Knuckles was able to plant one fist deep into the metal floor of the track. Still, all around them, the pull of the growing black hole yanked at their limbs. They only had seconds to go.

“Was your plan to push us further toward doom?” Knuckles shouted.

“That was step one,” Sonic said. “Anyone got a step two?”

“Try to grab one of my rings!” Tails flashed the small pack of warp rings he kept hidden away between his twin tails.

“Better than a fanny pack with a padlock!” Sonic cheered and then squeezed his restrained hand toward the fox. With extreme effort, he was able to grab a ring and balance it between his thumb and forefinger. “Got one! Now check this out…trick shot!”

Zam!

The ring flew into the air and opened up to Sonic’s desired location… only it, too, was caught in the black hole vortex. Their one chance at salvation was swirling above their heads with increasing speed.

“Was the trick to make us disappear?” Knuckles groaned.

“We’ve got to let it pull us in!” Tails said. “Knuckles, get ready to let go!”

“As you wish, fox. We will be sucked to our fate with honor!”

Sonic saw Tails’ plan and set his feet to push toward the spinning portal as soon as it reached their precarious place on the rapidly shrinking track floor. A whirlwind spun around them as Tails finally counted down, “Three…two…one…NOW!”

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CHAPTER 12

Things hadn't gone perfectly for Tails since he arrived on Earth. And to be honest? That was hard to deal with.

The fox arrived on the planet with one goal in mind: saving Sonic the Hedgehog. And did he do it? You bet he did. He didn't just help the fastest hero around avoid getting clobbered by a Knuckles out for vengeance. Tails helped them all become best friends. And he rewired a few critical inventions along the way. And he helped beat back Dr. Robotnik's giant mech menace. And he also built a plane from scratch. Pretty cool!

But when it was all over, the kid some called Miles "Tails" Prower also saw how much devastation their fight caused the city of Green Hills. He worried that their adventures to clean up renegade robots in the town dump would get them in trouble. And most of all, he feared that the Wachowskis wouldn't want him around if he blew another crater in their house…which is exactly what happened once they escaped the black hole vortex.

Zam!

With a force roughly equivalent to the escape velocity of Earth, Team Sonic blasted into Tom and Maddie's dining room. And Tails could see as they tumbled out of danger the way the walls were damaged, and the dishes were shattered. They'd even scattered the puzzle Tom was working on all over the house. Not good!

"Tom! Maddie!" Sonic cried, almost oblivious to the damage. "We need your help on a supersecret mission! The world is in danger!"

"Oh, thank god!" Tom let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Yeah, let's go!" Maddie jumped up.

"Really? You're in just like that?" Tails was shocked. "Because usually making a mess like this is where we get a talk about power and responsibility?"

“We can skip it.” Maddie smiled. “We love you no matter what. And it was getting *so* boring here without you guys, anyway.”

“Whatever crazy plan you’re cooking up right now, the answer is ‘yes!’ ” Tom agreed.

But having just avoided getting their atoms scrambled in a unique trap of physics, there really was no plan. Even Knuckles could sense it. “I fear we have already failed.” He shook his head. “It is only a matter of time until the Robotniks have the second launch key to this Eclipsing Cannon.”

“We’re not beat yet!” Tails rose up in confidence. If the family could stand by him even when he was anxious, maybe he could save the day even when he had his doubts. “We know where the bad guys are going. And we know what they’re planning.”

“So we just have to do exactly what they’re going to do…only faster,” Sonic said. “I can take care of the second part, but I’m going to need some help on the first. Any ideas, pal?”

“Yeah.” The fox felt the old thrill of a challenging logistical problem. “But I’ll have to explain everything as we go.”

As quickly as he could, Tails called forth the basic schematics he’d copied from G.U.N.’s files while piloting their helicopter. Anxiety didn’t solve all their problems, but it could help you get prepared from time to time. With a digital map on his Miles Electric Device as a guide, he spread a holographic plan across the family dining table. He had to cover all their upcoming objectives, so he hoped it was perfect.

“This is it, team. The belly of the beast. G.U.N. Headquarters in the heart of London,” he said as he leaned over the digital model of the city of London’s central corridor. “Phase One involves breaking through the outer perimeter of the main building here.” Tails pointed to a gleaming tower. “Now that won’t be easy.”

“No problem.” Sonic kicked his feet up on the dining room table. “I’ll just run in there superfast, grab the second key, and then run out *insanely* fast. That work for everyone?”

“Not exactly,” Tails replied. “The whole headquarters has been ‘Sonic-Proofed.’ The building is surrounded with motion sensors that can detect your unique energy signature miles away. And every exterior wall is sealed with metallic glass. It’s totally unbreakable.”

“Nothing is unbreakable, fox.” Knuckles crunched up the mat in his hands. “Nothing!”

Tails nervously swept aside the exterior and pulled up a second hologram of the building’s complex interior. “If the time comes to bust those walls down, Knuckles, it’s all you,” he said. “But for now, let’s talk about Phase Two: internal security. Inside the building we’ll be facing a garrison of G.U.N.’s most elite Special Forces troops. Plus, the security system is hardwired with thermal heat emitters, radar speed detectors, and jet engine–level fans. If we can’t directly hack their system to give me full control over it all, we’ll get burnt to a crisp, trapped in a cage, or blended into bits.”

The fox tapped a button on the screen of his Miles Electric, and like dominos the floors and walls of the hologram collapsed into a web of nightmare traps. Sonic could outrun anything, in Tails’ opinion, but this would be tough. “We absolutely *must* shut all this down in the security system while Sonic waits in position far away.”

“Good one, Tails!” Sonic laughed. “For a second, I thought you said I needed to wait around doing nothing while everyone else does hero stuff.”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“Whaaaat?? But you know ‘waiting’ is my only weakness!”

“Would you rather rush right in and trigger a full building lockdown and a perimeter energy wall powered by one million watts of electricity?” Tails connected a wire from his Miles Electric Device, and another action figure ignited into a pile of melting plastic.

“You know what? Waiting sounds good. Yup. I’m cool with waiting.”

“Last but not least, there’s a Phase Three: the final laser hall.” Tails dialed up a hologram showing a web of crisscrossing laser lights around a vault door. “Every inch of this area is programmed with hundreds of AI-powered laser cannons. And only once you’re past that can you deal with the vault itself.” He tapped a final button, and the digital representation of the vault opened up to reveal…absolutely nothing inside.

“Um, why is it empty in your vault?”

“Because we have no idea what’s on the other side of that door.” Tails shook his head. “To safeguard this space from ever being compromised by a warp ring, G.U.N. wiped their entire database of images and schematics past the vault door. If we can’t picture what it looks like, we can’t ’port in

there no matter what security is turned off. Essentially, we're going in blind."

"Okay, I'm just going to say it." Maddie stood up and paced the room. "If Knuckles can't bash his way through the building, and Sonic can't race his way through security, *and* we don't even know whether the laser-guided vault holds the key we need…it sounds like this plan would be a lot easier if we just grabbed the Master Emerald and let Sonic go golden god mode to get in there."

"No way." The hedgehog crossed his arms. "The Master Emerald is off-limits. We made a promise to each other to keep it safe."

"And hidden," Tails added. "It's in a location that only Knuckles knows."

"As Guardian of the Emerald, I must declare anyone who tries to steal it for their own selfish gain my sworn enemy." Knuckles put his foot down.

"Okay, okay, sheesh!" Maddie threw her hands in the air. "No need to get all growly on me, buddy. But if we're set on this plan, what's the secret sauce that makes it work, Tails?"

The fox looked over all the broken pieces of the Wachowski home and felt that pang of anxiety once again. This was his riskiest move yet. Would they trust his scheme to make it right? "Well, Maddie…the secret to saving the day is going to rely on family."

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CHAPTER 13

G.U.N. HQ security was laughably simple. Even a child could break through its defenses if it had half a brain. Luckily, Ivo Robotnik had more than a child's brain. He had a twelfth-level, highly evolved, catastrophically colossal, super cerebellum. In short, he had a Robotnik brain. There was no need to spend the final day before their big heist plotting out the whys and wherefores of laser systems or electrified floors.

Instead, Ivo focused his final hours before he liberated the final Eclipse Cannon launch key on what really mattered: Grandpapa!

Now that Gerald Robotnik was in his life, the doctor needed to make up for all the lost time they'd missed together. And since they were in the middle of a brilliantly nefarious scheme, only the magic of virtual reality would allow them to fast-forward through decades of missed bonding time.

They rode a tandem bicycle next to the River Thames, kicking any small children they passed along the shore into the water. They held a special graduation ceremony for all nine of the PhDs that Ivo had earned on his way to being an evil genius, and Gerald delivered the commencement speech at all of them. They even played a Christmas morning with Ivo in a green-and-red onesie sitting on the lap of "Santa Gerald" who promised to bring him as many heat-seeking Scud missiles as he could fit in a stocking.

Ivo couldn't pick a favorite activity, nor could he pick a favorite nickname for Gerald. Of course, "Grandpapa" was a classic, but "Gramps," "Grandpappy," and "Big Daddy" were all in the running, with "Pee-Paw" climbing up in the rankings fast.

As night fell, the Crab Mech lurched and tilted where it was submerged under the English Channel, but Robotnik felt no seasickness. "Oh, Pee-Paw!" he called to Gerald. "Do you think we have time to rob a candy store before the big mission?"

“Hey, could I get in on that?” called Agent Stone over the doctor’s shoulder. He was so *needy* these days. So human. So un-Robotnik.

“Do you mind?” Ivo snapped. “You’re interrupting a cherished family moment, Stone!”

“There’s no time for further shenanigans,” Grandpa Gerald announced, entering the room. “Join me in the command center, my boy. It’s time to launch the final phase of our triumph.”

In front of the Crab Mech’s main monitor bank, the Robotniks and that creepy little creature Shadow (and even Stone, the bore) gathered together to proceed with their plan.

“Our main annoyance will be G.U.N.’s so-called Special Forces troops.” Ivo mocked the grunts. “They’re a horde of mouth-breathing troglodytes, probably named Clive or Ringo, all armed to the teeth with sub-primitive…”

“Get to the point!” growled the hedgehog.

“Uh, Grandpa? Would you mind asking your demon hamster to tone down his murder eyes a little bit?”

“Don’t worry about Shadow,” Gerald said in a soothing tone. “Just carry on with our mission, my boy.”

Soon, the familial team were at work on the idiotic Guardian Units of Nations. As they strolled through the London fog toward the headquarters, Ivo felt a giddy rush of evil energy. He had to share it with the world.

“Cheers, streaming sycophants! I’m back with my long-lost Grandpapa Gerald!” he said to a camera mounted to one of the several egg drones that floated along with them. “Say hi, Pop-Pop!”

“Who the heck are you talking to?” Grandpa groused.

“My followers, of course! They’re fanatics, obsessives, Team Robotnik, the so-called ‘Egg-Heads’…”

“There are seven of us now!” Stone chimed in.

“This is a waste of time,” Shadow said. “Let me go in, get the key, and destroy anyone who gets in my way.”

“You will have your revenge against G.U.N. soon, Shadow,” Grandpa Robotnik said. “But a mission this important requires planning, precision…”

“…and an IQ higher than twelve!” Ivo could not stand the hedgehog any longer. “So why don’t you hang back with Stone while the geniuses do

the real work?”

Ivo Robotnik was finally ready to repay his grandfather for a perfect day of bonding with his latest innovation: matching mirrored leotards! Not only would they have all the tech they needed hardwired into their mustachioed bodies, they would also be able to turn virtually invisible before they even crossed the threshold of headquarters. They’d totally be twinsies!

“Let’s go, Grandpa,” he said, zipping the silvery suit onto his frame. “It’s time for some more family bonding. Stone, take the rat back and keep the Crab warm. This won’t take long.”

From here on out, it would be a breeze. All they had to do was set their internal temperature sensors to avoid the floor’s thermal heat emitters, waltz past any motion radar detectors, and rope their way up the elevator shaft past the barbaric chopping fans. Their invisibility would make the laser vault a cinch to bust into, and then they’d conquer the world.

What possible bag of flesh and failure on planet Earth could ever stop the rise of the Robotniks now?

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CHAPTER 14

Tom Wachowski was many things. He was father to a trio of intergalactic animal heroes. He was husband to a beautiful and talented wife. He was also a dedicated Lord of Donuts while also being a pretty decent pickleball player. But the thing he'd been proud of being for the longest time was a good cop.

Still, going undercover on an international mission was not the kind of thing he had a lot of experience in versus sitting in the Green Hills speed trap handing out tickets to absent-minded drivers. The former was much, much cooler than that.

"Guys! Are you ready for me yet?" Sonic's voice popped into Tom's ear from where the hedgehog stood two miles out waiting for his cue. "I've been waiting here all day!"

"We literally just started," Tails chimed in. The fox was controlling all communications from a remote location. "Tom, Maddie…are you both in position?"

"We're ready," Tom confirmed with as much '80s action hero gravel as he could muster. Maddie rolled her eyes at him. "Was that too much?"

"Little bit," she said before trying on her own growl. "They won't know what hit 'em."

"Ah, that was nice. Subtle difference, but I could feel your motivation more." Joking helped Tom relax as he stared across a nighttime square that led up to the G.U.N. HQ entrance.

Tails cut back in over the comm channel. "Knuckles, how about you?"

"I have taken my perch atop the giant clock, Big Benjamin," their most renegade family member reported. "Now where is the glass I am supposed to break?"

“Actually, Knucks, your job is just to ‘break glass in case of emergency,’ ” Sonic reminded him.

“Understood. I will shatter this glass like the jaw of a vile foe!”

“…in case of emergency,” Sonic repeated.

“I will pulverize it like the skull of a loathsome rival!”

“Again, key word here is *emergency*.”

“The glass will beg for mercy under the shadow of my mighty fists as I…”

“You know what?” Sonic sighed. “Let’s just move on.”

“Way to play nicely, boys.” Tom smiled.

“All right, everyone knows what to do now.” Tails took command again. “Tom and Maddie, you guys have to plant the USB drive that will give me control of the security traps into the G.U.N. mainframe. We’re all depending on you there. Then Sonic will rush in to snatch the launch key. And Knuckles will stand by to…”

“Break much glass in case of emergency!”

“See?” Sonic laughed. “He gets it.”

After all their time saving the world—heck, the universe even—it put Tom at ease to know these kids didn’t let the pressure of the job push them away from being kind brothers. It’s what made for good cops. But better than that, they were good people.

“Okay, sweetie,” he said, and winked at Maddie before dropping into his gravel voice one last time. “Let’s go to work.”

With that, Tom reached up and tapped a small button Tails had fixed into his jacket. With a flicker of light, a whole new holographic face spread out over Tom’s normal look. It was one last piece of G.U.N. tech that the fox had liberated from his contact with their systems. Maddie did the same, and suddenly they were the spitting image of two well-known, well-trusted agents.

“You’re not scared of what we’re about to do?” she asked.

“Break into the base of an international law enforcement agency for the purpose of espionage? No way,” Tom said. “Do it while pretending to be your sister’s husband…your sister who hated me well before our adopted alien son blew her wedding to pieces? Maybe a little scared of that, yeah.”

It was true. The small-town sheriff and veterinarian wife were indistinguishable from Rachel and Randall Handel. If the two of them got

caught on this job, going to a London jail would be the least of their problems. But Tom could take it. He could do anything to help his kids. He was the Donut Lord, dang it.

The couple crossed the building's threshold and approached the desk guard. Tom radiated Randall's confidence even if he didn't quite have his muscular frame. "Afternoon," he said in his deepest voice. "Agent Randall Handel, here with my lovely wife, Rachel."

"Ma'am, do you work in the building?" the guard asked. And Tom worried whether she did or not. He never asked Rachel about her life!

"Do I *work* in the building?" Maddie snapped in a flawless impersonation of her bossy sister. "Buddy, you're lucky I don't *own* the building!"

"Oh! Um…sorry, ma'am. Go on in."

"That's what I thought!" Maddie sniffed and lifted Rachel's chin high as they strode to the elevator.

With unshakable attitudes in place, the couple made their way to the fifth floor, following Tails' instructions to the letter. This was the make-or-break moment for their mission. Even as decorated an agent as Randall Handel couldn't waltz into the security control center and start barking orders. With another flick on her lapel, Maddie transformed once again, into a G.U.N. personality who Tom hoped was actually nowhere near this building right now.

"Director Rockwell, seeking access to the server room," she said in her closest approximation of the woman who was currently out to destroy their kids at all costs. Tom had shifted his own face to that of a nondescript agent at Rockwell's side. As far as Tom was concerned, turnabout was fair play.

"Just a moment, ma'am…," the security guard at the entrance to the server bank said before heading to the back. They waited for a tense few moments, but the door didn't open for them. Instead, a door down the hall opened up to reveal the *real* Director Rockwell coming through with a cadre of agents at her command.

"Switch!" Maddie whispered sharply before changing her own face back to Rachel. Tom froze in place as the woman whose identity they had just stolen walked by and shot him a stern look.

In a moment, the danger had passed, but Maddie looked at her husband quizzically. "Why didn't you shift?"

“This thing is hard to work!” He shrugged. But soon, Maddie had returned to her previous alias just in time for the guard to return and grant them unfettered access to the security servers.

“I hope this works, Tails!” Maddie said as she slid the USB drive into the requested slot.

“I’m in!” the fox called back on their earpiece comms.

“You better hurry up, buddy!” Tom said as a monitor screen in front of him flashed through every security camera in the place. Tails was working fast, it seemed, but Tom could see that Rockwell and dozens of other agents were swarming the building. One wrong move could blow their whole heist.

“Exterior speed sensors deactivated,” Tails called out. “I’m working on the inside traps now, but…this is strange!”

“What is it?” Tom asked impatiently.

“I’m getting some false readings here,” he said. “The heat emitters have been popping off at random. Even the elevator fan blades are working in overdrive. It’s like there’s a ghost in the machine making trouble all over where Sonic is supposed to run. Two of them even!”

“Wait!” Maddie said. “There’s another USB plugged in over here…and it has a mustache on it!”

“Oh no, the ghost signatures!” Tails realized too late. “Sonic, if you can read me, the Robotniks are almost at the vault door! It’s time!”

Just then, the monitor in front of Tom flipped to the vault room. It looked empty, and the laser cannons were drooping dead. But in that second, two shimmering shapes came to life and began attaching tech to the vault door. If there was ever a time his son needed to live up to his bragging rights, now was it.

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CHAPTER 15

"Put me in, Coach!" Sonic cried the millisecond he heard Tails.

Schwooooooosh!

His feet flew like they rarely did. He'd once sped across the entire globe in one run with the aid of warp rings. But he couldn't run straight into G.U.N. HQ in a blink without pushing his hyperspeed all the way to the max. He had to build up enough speed to blink through any phantom dangers. And there were a few pranks he could pull along the way.

Coincidentally, that meant taking the ten-second tour of London's most famous sights.

First, he spun himself around the London Eye. Then, he tore through Buckingham Palace and carried out a suit of armor with him, but it was just to make palace guards do a double take. (Which they totally did, don't tell!) He gained momentum across the Tower Bridge, past Abbey Road (sacred ground), and even to Piccadilly Circus (no clowns, thank goodness).

It all took just a few seconds, but he had the charge to go all the way, and in a blink, Sonic skidded through the doors of the G.U.N. building and found an army of traps waiting for him.

Flames shot up as he crossed the first level of floor tiles. But it wasn't just heat blasts. Approaching the elevator shaft, fans blew him up in a corkscrew spin where he was about to get sliced up. But it wasn't just the blender blades that posed great danger. As he spun his way across the ceiling, spikes burst forth, looking to stab him. It's almost like someone had programmed a giant game meant to stop Sonic from getting to his goal!

"Sonic! Wait! I've got to disable the full security system!" Tails' voice came over the comm.

But Sonic sped forward. He knew that only seconds stood between him and an evil strong enough to blow up the world. He could handle a few

extra booby traps, surely.

“Stop right there, Ro-Butt-Niks!” the hedgehog cried as he slid to a halt in front of the vault door. With a shudder, it opened, as egg drones from the dual doctors (and, Sonic had to note, their *ridiculous* outfits) worked to unveil the hidden contents of G.U.N.’s most secure location. Inside the spherical chamber, Sonic could see a glowing steel orb. It was some kind of container, and it had to hold the second launch key.

“Follow me, Pop-Pop!” Ivo Robotnik called. “Destiny awaits!” And with two steps, the pair of villains both leaped into the vault…and immediately stumbled to the floor, where they stuck like glue.

“Ivo!” the older man gasped. “Get up…!”

“I…can’t…!” grunted Sonic’s archnemesis.

Never looking a gift horse in the mouth, Sonic swirled and super sped to the ceiling and crossed into the vault at an angle only he could achieve. “Too slow, Eggmen! Now if you don’t mind, I gotta get that…whoooooa!” Suddenly, he was swimming in the air as if there were nothing between him and the void of deep space. Even though he was still inside! “My feet!” he cried. “Why can’t I use my beautiful feet!”

“Because the vault is armed with variable gravity,” said a woman behind them all. It was Rockwell, entering with a handful of guards at her back. She clicked a button, and her boots lit up floor tiles that allowed the director to walk with ease past everyone and snatch up the orb. Rockwell removed the launch key from its case and left the vault without even looking at the rest of them.

“Rockwell, listen to me,” Sonic pleaded. “The Robotniks are planning to—”

“Steal the second key just like you are?” she replied with barely contained contempt. “Yeah, I know. I called this the moment Walters was attacked. So congrats on taking the bait, alien. You fell right into our trap.”

“Trickery…,” Ivo struggled to say as he was smothered by gravity, “…is the generic knockoff…of genius!”

“Shut your mustache, Robotnik,” Rockwell replied. “I know you all thought you were so clever with your little schemes. But none of you ever really had the power to shut down all our security systems. And now we’ve got half of G.U.N.’s Most Wanted List under one roof.” At the edge of the room, Tom, Maddie, and even Tails were marched in, handcuffs on their

wrists. “It’s over. The only way you criminals are leaving is in chains. There’s no other way out.”

Sonic considered her threat for a minute and realized that maybe there was a way to beat her. He’d have to *think* fast. “You’re probably right, Rockwell.” The hedgehog smirked. “Then again, there might be *one* other way out. We just have to…*break glass in case of emergency*!”

“What does that even mean?” The director scowled at him as silence overtook the chamber. But just one more second was all he needed until…

KA-BOOOOOOM!

Like fire set on high, Knuckles burst through the wall, bringing shards of the building’s no longer protected glass surface with him. They should have cut the comms line when they found Tails’ hiding spot, but that would have involved G.U.N. knowing more about tech than the fox. And that was never gonna happen.

“See, fox? Nothing is unbreakable!” the echidna shouted as he landed in the room, charged with red energy from head to toe.

“Open fire!” Rockwell shouted. In the mix of crumbling building and scattered laser fire from the agents, the director dropped her control device, releasing both Sonic and the doctors from the wonky gravity prison. Sonic sprinted to the side of his family and started to undo their cuffs.

“Sonic! Go for the key!” Tom cried.

“Not until you guys are safe!”

“I’ve got an idea,” the Donut Lord said. “Trust me.” And with a flick of the button on his lapel, Tom transformed himself into someone else and darted into the fray.

On one side of the room, Knuckles blasted back shot after shot from the agents, but across the way, Ivo Robotnik tapped a handful of buttons and brought his egg drone back under his thumb. Sonic leaped in between the villains and Rockwell, hoping that he could at least keep the launch key out of their hands for a moment more. But as he blasted back and forth between the berserk bots, another face entered the mad scene.

“Director Rockwell…,” a shaky voice called out as Commander Walters, bruised but seemingly revived from his hospital bed, stepped forward.

“Commander? You’re…”

“Still alive?” The old soldier smiled. “I’ll die before I’ll let that key fall into the wrong hands. Good work keeping it safe. I’ll take it from here…”

“We both know I’m the only one you can trust with it,” Rockwell said, relieved.

“Thank you.” Walters nodded as he palmed the launch key. “Now get your people to safety at once.”

Yet as soon as Rockwell turned away to call her guards to form up for a retreat, Walters dodged out into a hallway.

“Walters, wait!” the hedgehog called.

With a turn of his head, the old man’s face melted away only to reveal the heroic grin of Tom Wachowski. “Guys, I’ve got the key. I finally figured out the face mask thingy! Now let’s get out of here.” He let the identity of Walters wave back over his own looks, and then disappeared ahead of them toward the stairwell.

KA-POOOWWW!

Another hole burst into the defenseless building. But this time, it wasn’t the wild swings of Knuckles that caused the commotion, but the vengeful power of Shadow. Sonic shivered as he struggled to make it to where he knew Shadow was, burning angrier than ever before.

“Commander Walters…,” the Ultimate Life-Form sneered. “It’s good to see you again!”

Shadow looked down at the man who he thought was his most hated foe, and in that instant spotted the launch key in Tom’s hand.

“No-no-no, wait!” Tom tried to speak. “You don’t underst—”

Krunch!

With one supercharged punch to the floor, Shadow sent a shockwave of broken concrete and chaos energy at Tom, slamming Sonic’s dad to the ground with deadly force. Sonic arrived in the hallway a split second too late. The launch key went flying, but he didn’t even look where it might land.

“TOM!” he cried. “NOOOOOOO!”

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CHAPTER 16

Victory was in Shadow's grasp at last. It had been fifty years of waiting with the tortured memories of Maria's last day playing over and over in his mind. But now the man responsible was going to pay. And so would the entire rotten race that spawned Commander Walters.

Shadow reached to the ground and picked up the second launch key. With this small piece of plastic and metal, he would be able to activate the Eclipse Cannon and finally wipe away the hurt that had been delivered to him for as long as he could remember. But first, he had to dispatch that annoying, unserious little hedgehog…

"Tom! Tom, get up!" Sonic was pleading over the fallen body of Walters. "Please, GET UP!"

The blue one didn't seem to even care that Shadow had won. He just yelled at Walters' fallen body…though it wasn't Walters at all, was it? His vengeance would have to wait longer still. What was done was done. And yet, Shadow could not help but feel sorry for this creature's pain. He was no longer the joking fool with platitudes about their similarities.

In fact, when Sonic finally looked up from the body, he only said one word, laced with absolute fury. "You," he growled at Shadow, but Shadow was already teleporting away.

In a blink, Shadow stood next to the entrance to the vault. Nearby, Gerald Robotnik was taunting the remaining G.U.N. agents with one of his insipid egg drones.

"We have what we came for," Shadow said, lifting up the prized launch key with its eclipse symbol shimmering.

"And soon, we'll have vengeance!" the elder Robotnik cried. In all the time Shadow knew Gerald in his lab, he had rarely seen the scientist so… unhinged.

“So we have two keys…but where’s the Eclipse Cannon?” called the younger Robotnik. Ivo. He lurched up and stood back-to-back with his grandfather.

“It’s right here, my boy,” Gerald said with a mad glint in his eye. He snatched Shadow’s launch key to combine it with the one he previously took from the blue hedgehog. When the devices combined, it created a high-pitched sound. Suddenly, the building began to quake.

Rrrrrrrrrrumble!!!

Shadow stepped toward a large hole that had been blasted into the floor. Out along the skyline of the city of London, he watched as the tremor that originated with the G.U.N. HQ rocked a destructive path out to the river. The water opened up like a giant sinkhole, and what arose in its center was unlike anything the hedgehog had ever seen. It was some kind of spaceship —a massive black satellite rocket whose nose was now rising toward the sky.

Then in a shimmer of unearthly light, Shadow’s body was enveloped in energy, and he dematerialized. When someone else controlled his teleporting, the hedgehog found the effect…unnerving. But he soon regained solid form. And from the black bay window in front of him, he could tell that he was standing on the bridge of the Eclipse Cannon’s ship, looking up at the ruined G.U.N. building he’d just occupied. Both Robotniks were next to him.

“Welcome to my masterpiece!” bragged Gerald. The elder Robotnik marched around inspecting every inch of the high-tech weapon with pride. “I must hand it to them…they built her to my exact specifications.”

“It’s remarkable, astounding, and functionally dysfunctional!” Ivo danced around agog at the place. “That’s my genius grand genome!”

“And I’ve got one more surprise, my boy!” the elder said, pushing a button that revealed matching red space suits from a hidden compartment.

Ivo Robotnik put on his suit with the enthusiasm of a child in a costume shop, humming, “I’m a chip off the old block!” As his grandfather completed his own preflight prep, Shadow heard the younger Robotnik’s communicator blip to life.

“What do you want, Stone?! I’m busy!” he growled.

“Doctor, I have a bad feeling about this,” a sniveling voice came from the other end. “I don’t think your grandfather has been completely honest

with us. It's something Shadow said, there's more to their plan!"

"How dare you!" Ivo snapped. "You've been jealous of my long-lost grand pop-tart since the very beginning! I no longer require your obsequious groveling. Consider this your notice of termination. Your letter of reference will be *L* for loser. Of course, I expect you to stay on until you've been successfully cloned. But you and I are done like a blackened catfish dinner!"

"Sir, it's too dangerous and I'm not there to protect you," the assistant pleaded in vain. "I've already lost you once, I…"

"Unsubscribe! Blocked and reported!" Ivo cut the call short.

Shadow felt a momentary shiver of pity run through his quills, but Gerald soon swept in to keep the plan on track. "Do the honors, grandson," the old man said, snapping the two launch keys into a single tool and handing them over.

"These two interlocking keys represent the unbreakable malevolent bond of familial darkness that I wished for as a child in the orphanage." Ivo raised the key as his speech droned on. "Christmases were especially hard for me what with all the melodramatic family movies and…"

"Ivo! It's time to further the plot! Now, stick that MacGuffin in the hole," Gerald commanded at last.

"Let's light this candle!" Ivo called out in celebratory fashion, and in an instant both he and his grandfather were grinning as the turn of the key initiated the cannon ship's launch.

CHOOOOOOOOOOOM!

In a blast of fire surely more powerful than the meteorite that brought Shadow to Earth, the rocket rumbled from its river-based silo and ascended to the stars. The force of gravity pressed Shadow's body to the hard floor. In the corner of his eye, he could see the two doctors strap into matching captain's chairs. They cackled like lunatics all the way up.

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CHAPTER 17

It was glorious to again engage in battle. Knuckles hardly had cause to test the might of his warrior muscles since arriving on Earth. Once he matched Sonic blow for blow before realizing that the hedgehog made for more than a worthy adversary but a worthy friend. And recently he had defeated renegade agents who sought to steal his own power, as well as the mad scientist who built them their weapons of war.

But even his adventure to break bones and go bowling in Reno, Nevada, could not compare to the thrill of tackling an entire legion of armed guardians on their home turf.

“See how you shatter like the glass I broke for this emergency!” the echidna howled with delight. Here he dodged laser fires, and there he smashed their plasma rifles as though they were children’s toys. Yet even as Knuckles confronted the unarmed agents with his mighty fists, he refused to batter their bodies. He was a noble warrior and embarrassing them in their home was victory enough for now.

Across the room, the two madmen called Robotnik sent their drones careening through the air, and Knuckles slammed his way toward them. With a bash and a swat, he crushed two of their egg drones to pieces, but he wanted more. He wanted those backstabbing trappers of animals to hurt more than anyone on Earth. And if he got a chance to face the dangerous hedgehog Shadow one-on-one, all the better.

It was not to be. As he reached their location, the floor of the building shook with intergalactic fury, and in a moment of bright light, all three villains disappeared. Knuckles could hear the sound of earth splitting apart through the hole he himself had created. But now there was nothing more to do than find his family and plan the next battle.

In the hall, the scene the warrior found was not one of triumph but tragedy.

“Tom, please wake up! You have to be okay!” Sonic cried over the limp form of the Lord of Donuts. “I need you…I need my dad…”

“Someone get a doctor! NOW!” Maddie commanded. But no humans rose to their aid.

CHOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Another hole in the building showed a sight unbelievable as a large black rocket shot past them and into the sky. “Oh no…” Tails shook his head, seeming to comprehend a dark turn in their fates.

At last, paramedics arrived and loaded the fallen Tom onto a gurney. They said he was stable, but unresponsive. Knuckles could not comprehend how both of those things could be true. But even in her grief, Maddie kept her head high as she followed him to the ambulance. Stunned silence overtook the team as Tom was taken away. But as usual, it was the hedgehog who spoke first.

“We can’t let them win,” Sonic said, fury and tears bursting from his visage. “We have to *destroy* them. And there’s only one way to do it now.”

“Wait, you don’t mean…,” Tails said.

“The Master Emerald.”

It could not be. Knuckles refused to believe this was the Sonic he knew. “No, hedgehog,” the warrior explained. “The Emerald must never be wielded for vengeance. We swore a sacred oath to protect it after our adventure to the planet of sand!”

“Don’t talk to me about oaths when Tom is fighting for his life and there’s a doomsday weapon threatening Earth!” Sonic shouted back.

“But you told Tom using the Emerald wasn’t the right choice,” Tails declared. “You said that yourself!”

“Well, now it’s the *only* choice. And if neither of you have the guts to make it…then I will.” Sonic shook with rage, something Knuckles had not thought possible before. “I’m not asking you twice, Knuckles. Where is the Master Emerald?”

Where the hedgehog was going, he would have to go alone. Though he respected Sonic’s warrior spirit, Knuckles would not budge on his sacred vow. “Your heart has been consumed by anger, hedgehog,” he said. “The Emerald’s power is too dangerous in your hands.”

“He’s right, Sonic!” Tails sprung between them before the argument came to blows. “No one can be trusted with a weapon that powerful. Remember?”

“Last chance,” Sonic seethed. *“Where. Is. It?”*

“As last of the Echidna, I will not break my sworn promise…even if you have chosen to break yours.” Knuckles shook his head. “I will protect the Emerald at all costs. That is why I have placed it under the watch of a trusted ally. Trained by my own hand. Forged in the fire of battle to become this planet’s most fearsome warrior!”

The tension hung in the air between them stronger than the unbreakable blade of an ancient knight. But suddenly, a light hit Sonic’s eyes. The hedgehog sprinted away, crossing the ocean.

“You gave the Master Emerald to Wade Whipple, didn’t you?” Tails asked.

“How did you know?”

Despite the fox’s unbelievable skills of deduction, Knuckles felt that Sonic might not find Wade before they did if they could only move fast enough. Using the warp rings from Tails’ bag of tricks, they soon found themselves on the other side of the world in Green Hills. Yet Wade was nowhere to be found. Not at his home, nor his bowling alley hall of triumph. At last, they teleported to his place of work—the beloved Green Hills Sheriff’s Department.

Zam!

Knuckles and Tails walked through the ring portal and into the station, but they found no sign of the young man-child of a warrior.

“Where could he be?” the fox asked, distraught.

“If we mediate, the answer may come to us,” Knuckles said. “Sometimes waiting for the hand of fate is the warrior’s only path.” They closed their eyes and concentrated, and the silence of the space felt like a holy shrine. Then suddenly, an answer came from on high.

“It all comes down to forty-one-year-old rookie sensation ‘Warrior Wade Whipple,’ ” called out their friend’s voice, just a whisper of its usual volume. “He leads the league in goals, assists, and broken hearts…and he’s flying up the ice with time for One. Last. Shot!”

Clack!

The sound of a stick hitting solid matter reverberated through the air, and both Knuckles and Tails knew where it had come from. “He’s on the roof playing hockey!” they cried in unison.

As the pair rushed outside and looked above them, they saw Wade rollerblading around the station’s uppermost level. But just that instant, Sonic himself appeared—still furious and undeterred.

“I’m here for the Emerald,” the hedgehog explained.

“What Emerald?” Wade stammered before all on-site looked down to the net he had just scored on and came to the realization that the warrior-in-training had been using the most powerful object in the known universe as his puck. “Oh, you mean this Emerald? I’m afraid that’s a ‘no can do,’ buddy. Me and Knuckles made a pact to protect it. Kind of a big deal.”

The hedgehog stepped toward the Master Hockey Emerald. “Sonic!” Wade stood his ground. “I promised to guard this thing with my life. And I’ll do whatever it takes to…”

Whoooosh!

In a flurry of speed, Sonic swiped up the Emerald and carried it to the edge of the roof. It was a noble effort from Knuckles’ protégé, but in the end, it was doomed to fail.

“Well, I tried.” Wade shrugged as Sonic began absorbing the unlimited green power of the Master Emerald. “But the good news is that you’d never wield that godlike power irresponsibly, right?” Without a word, Sonic rose in the air, shimmered with untold energy, and called forth a dark cloud on the horizon.

Kra-Kow!

Lightning struck the hedgehog, releasing a wave of power that blew all witnesses back into the dirt. Glowing with gold power and more anger than ever, the highly charged Super Sonic rose into the air and flew into space like a comet in reverse.

“That seems a little menacing, but I’m sure it’s fine,” Wade marveled, and then noticed Knuckles and Tails climbing the ladder to the roof. “Oh hey, guys! Everything okay?”

Knuckles did not know how to respond.

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CHAPTER 18

At the edge of outer space, Super Sonic flew like a blazing comet.

It had happened once before, but it couldn't possibly feel familiar. Sonic's fur had transformed into that glowing, golden hue. His quills grew long and pulsated with energy. And as he rose ever faster, ever higher into the atmosphere, the now Super Sonic felt like nothing could ever harm him. Nothing would ever stop him.

And one major thing had changed since his last merging with the Master Emerald. Before he was only defending his home. But now, he was avenging his father. And the Robotniks and Shadow would know it.

SHOOOOOOM!

Super Sonic flew even faster, picturing his adversaries in his mind's eye. Shadow was lost and angry, but he was also dangerous. How could Sonic have ever thought the two of them were the same?

On the other side, using Shadow for their own nefarious purposes, was the family Robotnik. Gerald was an unknown factor, but he seemed even crazier than his gruesome grandson. And Ivo himself? He was never anything but a villain, but betraying all of planet Earth just to impress his putrid patriarch was too much.

The glittering power of the Eclipse Cannon came into view as Super Sonic's power increased alongside his rage. Back on Earth, Donut Lord's life hung by a thread. It was everything Sonic could do not to let the fear of that loss crush his spirit. He had to put everything back home out of his mind—even his friends. Team Sonic had always stood by him. Was Super Sonic too rash to take the power of the Emerald for his own? No. Only the fight mattered now.

One way or the other, it would be here in space where the story ended. Either Super Sonic wrestled control of the Eclipse Cannon from the trio of

villains, or Earth suffered the consequences. And as he sped the final miles toward the weapon's window, Super Sonic knew he wouldn't lose anymore.

"This ends NOW!" he screamed as he crashed into his final battle.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiel Phegley is the author of several titles for Penguin Young Readers Licenses, including *Sonic the Hedgehog: The Official Movie Novelization*, *Sonic the Hedgehog's Race Against Chaos Sticker Activity Book*, and *Sonic and the Tales of Terror*.

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